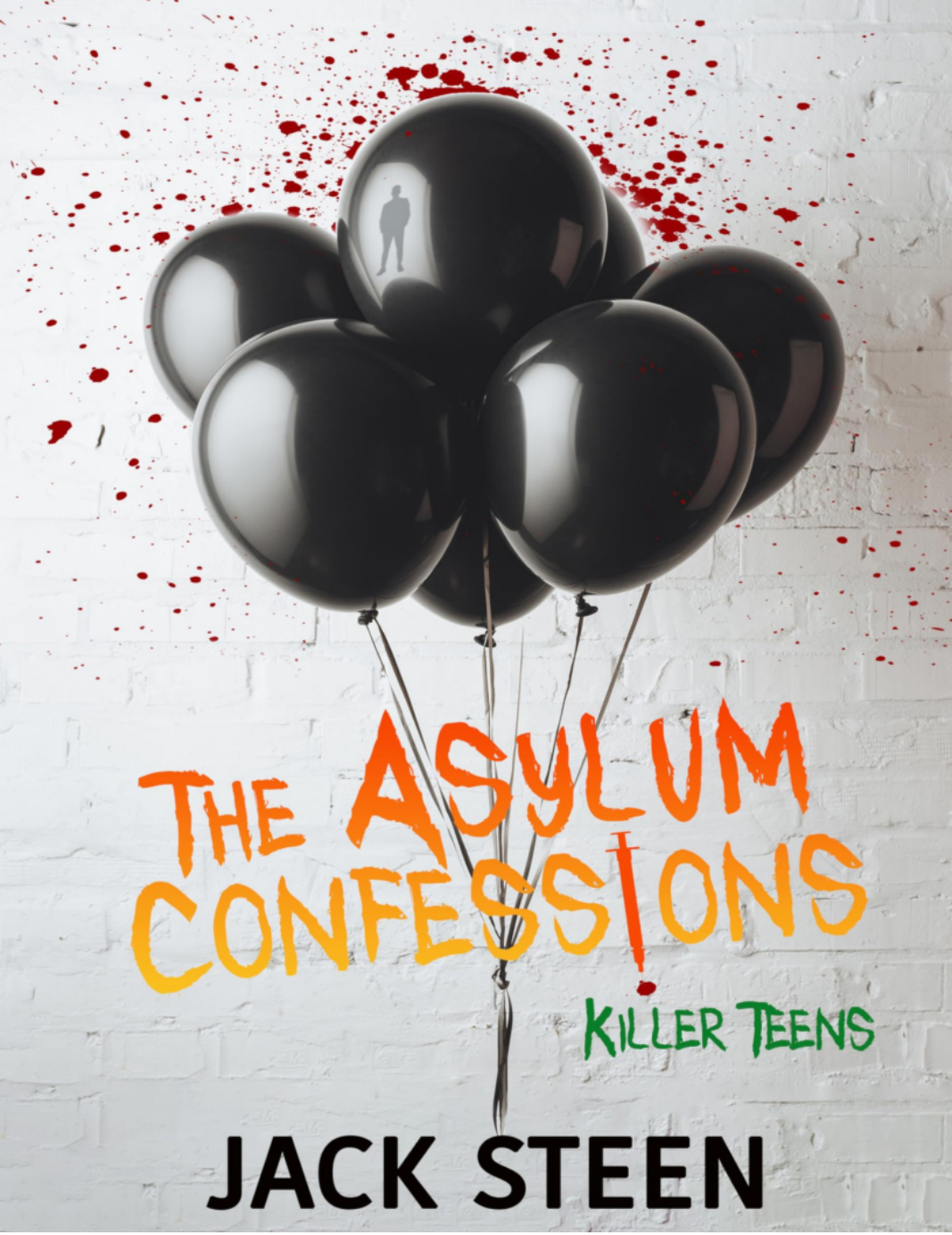
THE ASYLUM CONFESSIONS
KILLER TEENS
JACK STEEN

THE ASYLUM CONFESSIONS

KILLER TEENS

THE ASYLUM CONFESSION FILES

JACK STEEN

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ONLY JACK KNOWS

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NOTE TO READERS

Hey, Confession Addicts, it's time for a new confession, and I hope you're ready.

I can't believe this is book nine already. The good thing is you don't need to read these books in order, so whether this is your first or your ninth, I hope you enjoy!

You know how this works by now. My patients arrive on my floor alive, but it's guaranteed that they will always leave dead. Always. The question is … is it by my hand or by natural causes?

Does it really matter?

The majority of my patients are expert manipulators. If you've read any of these confessions before now, you get that. If this is your first one, well, welcome to the final game my patients think they're playing.

Especially the last confession in this book…

So what's this confession book about? Well, I polled my VIP Addicts group last time around, and they wanted the confessions from kids who killed, so that's what you get. Except they're not kids anymore when they tell me their confession.

To my fellow Asylum addicts in my VIP Addicts Subscription group, long-time readers, and to my new friends… salut!

THANK YOU

Special thank you's to the following "Long Term Patients, Ward Members and Asylum Addicts" from my VIP ADDICTS Subscription groups. This book would not be possible without your support!

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These confessions are dedicated to you!

JOIN ME

I'm just going to throw this out there: there will be more books. But while you wait, why not join me over on my VIP ADDICTS group?

What happens over there? A lot. Like…you read these confessions before anyone else. Like…you get to name characters. Like…you get free books.

It's also a better way to stay in touch rather than a mailing list that you may or may not see in your inbox.

https://www.patreon.com/jacksteen

Click to check it out…no pressure, but if you do sign up, be sure to say hello in one of the posts, and I'll raise a toast to you at the pub.

WHO AM I?

(Hey you…don't skip this part…important info about this book at the end, even if you already think you know 'who I am')

My name is Jack Steen.

By now, if you've read a few of the other confessions, you know my name and what these confession books are about.

I'm a night nurse in the asylum, and I listen to the deathbed confessions of the criminally insane.

For these patients of mine, I'm their companion into the afterlife, their death angel if you will. I give them the one thing they've been craving for since coming to the asylum—an audience.

By now, you should know the routine. Don't ask which asylum because I will never tell. Besides, it really doesn't matter which one. They're all the same. Don't ask me about the patients either. I change their names, victims' names, settings, etc. I'm serious about not wanting to get sued.

So, what is it I do that's so special? Well, let me tell you. I take their deathbed confessions, the ones no one else has heard. The ones everyone wants to hear.

My patients tell me their stories, and they confess their messed-up lives because I do what no one else in this fucking asylum does.

I listen.

I've worked here the longest out of anyone on my floor. I've got the scars, the stitches, and the broken bones to prove it. I worked my way from the shittiest jobs here to the one I have now.

I used to think being a nurse was my calling. My passion. I thought I could make a difference and that what I did was meaningful.

I was stupid to think anything in life was worth this shit.

I used to work in a hospital full of people who had lives and loved ones who cared about them. Most of my patients here have been discarded, forgotten about, and left to spend their final days alone.

Here's a reminder—I won't tell you which hospital I work at. I won't tell you the names of those dying. But I won't lie to you. You'll read exactly what I'm told.

The confessions you'll read here are all going to focus on one

central theme. This book is about kids who committed murders. Kids who kill.

Scary shit, right?

I can't say all the stories I'm told are one hundred percent true. Some I believe. Some I don't. That shouldn't be surprising. I mean, look at who is telling the confession. Some of my patients are pure psychopaths, narcissistic, and like the sound of their voices. They'll tell whatever tale they believe will get them the most notice, but, like every tale ever told, there's always a nugget of truth. Then again, what the fuck do I know?

These sadistic bastards could be playing their final game with me by messing with my head, and now, they could be playing with yours.

THE THEME FOR THESE CONFESSIONS...

I'm not going to lie. This is a theme I've placed on the back burner for a while.

Why? Honestly, I'm not sure.

Ike thinks it's because I'm a softie at heart, that I can't get out of my head that these killers were teenagers, and I can't get that out of my head.

Fuck that shit, though. I don't feel sorry for any of them. They committed a crime. They served their time, and then, they died.

All of them lived within these walls—or similar—for longer than they did outside them. Personally, I think that's what gets me.

I'm not going to get into the whole "everyone deserves a second chance" idea. That's not up to me. It's not even up to you, but I'm sure you'll have an opinion after you read these.

If you really think about it, these patients—and most who are in here—probably would have ended up right back in here if they had been let out. They're here for a reason, and not many can handle real life after living within the structured routine of a prison.

So, maybe I'm overthinking things.

You're wondering what you're about to read, right?

Confessions from inmates/patients who became killers as teenagers. These were some fucked-up little shits. We've all known teens like them, haven't we?

Maybe if they had someone help them beforehand, their lives would have or could have been different.

Or maybe not.

Maybe they were born killers. What the fuck do I know, right?

We're back to the whole nurture versus nature argument.

By now, you know where I stand, but what about you? Do you think little shits grow up to be big shits, or do you think there's a simple chance of redemption for every person if they're just given the right tools?

Well, how about you read these confessions and then let me know. I'm interested in your thoughts, and I say that honestly.

PATIENT: ADRIANNA

Deathbed Confessions of the Criminally Insane

Thank you to the following for helping me name the characters:
AmyMae for naming Adrianna
AllieKatt for naming the parents, Aubrey & Nathan
Allthings618 - naming Paul (boyfriend)
Kristen Prevendoski for naming Nicole and Sean

CHAPTER ONE

Who wants to hear a joke?

Well, I would make a joke about serial killers, but I have a feeling it would be dead on arrival.

At least tell me I got an eye roll for that one.

I meet a lot of people in my job. Some are as sane as you and I, while others, well, they make for interesting conversations.

Some people in here find ways to change their lives. Others get lost in the past, and many others are just plain… lost.

Are you wondering about the next confession and whether they've changed their lives, been lost in the past, or just plain lost? Well, this one has been a lost girl since she first arrived, and no amount of medication or therapy has given her the means to find her way.

Some people are just like that.

Adrianna was interesting to talk to. She might be in her sixties, but it isn't hard to see the teenager who brought her here. She hasn't lost that edge.

I know a few guys who are stuck in the glory days of the past. They're always talking about the good ole days when they did this, got away with that, and lived life to the fullest compared to today when you can't get away with anything. We all know people like that, right?

Adrianna was like that. The real world, the now, wasn't important to her.

Now, don't get me wrong. She was aware of it—aware she was an inmate, aware she spent more time here than outside of this place, aware she had a life sentence, aware she wasn't like normal people. She was aware, but it didn't matter, if that makes any sense.

I'll use Ike's words here: She was stuck in a time loop where she was reveling in the deeds she did as an eighteen-year-old despite the fact her body was failing her as a sixty-year-old.

How about I just let Adrianna tell you her story herself? Maybe then you'll understand.

CHAPTER TWO

JACK

The floor is quiet.

Some quiets are noisy. The being machine from the patients' rooms seem to echo nonstop throughout the floor.

Some quiets are stressful. You're waiting on pins and needles for something to happen.

Some quiets are calming. There's a sense that you can relax. It's not quite peaceful but almost.

"Fuck, I hate when the floor it's like this." Ike pushes his chair back and climbs to his feet. "Something's going to happen. I can feel it."

"How about you shut the fuck up, and then it won't?" I look up from the crossword puzzle I've been working on for the past hour or so and give him a nasty glare.

Ike knows better than to jinx things. He's not a fucking newbie.

He grumbles something I choose to ignore.

"What's a five-letter word for the color red?" I tap my pen against the paper and crack my neck.

He laughs at me. "Seriously? You, of all people, need help with that one? Blood."

I look down at the sheet, and yeah, it works. I give him the one-finger salute in thanks.

"No notes from the day shift about anyone coming up?" Ike pours the last bit of coffee into my cup before he starts to make a fresh pot.

I take a sip. Damn, that coffee is good. I brought in a new blend, and it hits the spot.

"Just enjoy the peace. Don't you have files to update or stock to replenish or something to clean?" I wave him away like a pesky fly while biting back my smile.

He's in a mood to be irritating, and I'm in the mood to irritate him. It'll be a great shift… so long as this quiet holds.

He marches off but not before saying a few more choice words that I choose to continue ignoring. I've no idea what he's going to do, but if it means leaving me in peace to enjoy the freshly brewed coffee,

then I'm all for it.

I'm almost done with the crossword when the phone rings. I'm of a mind not to answer it, but the stillness on the floor is getting to me. Two nights in a row of this awkward quietness – I'm over it.

I won't say that to Ike, though. I enjoy watching him stew.

"One coming up your way. You'll enjoy this one."

I'm intrigued. There are a lot of patients I know I'll enjoy having up here, so trying to narrow it down will be hard.

The inmate population is aging, which means this floor lately is always full. Not to mention, every so often, a few shit disturbers downstairs will get bored and staff will get lazy, and then patients come up to this floor before they should.

That's just life in a place like this.

"Who?" I ask.

"Adrianna."

Well, shit.

CHAPTER THREE

When I find Ike, I plan to give him a heads-up about our incoming visitor, but he's neck-deep in a supply closet.

"What are you doing?" I ask.

He jumps like a scared cat then punches me in the arm. "What the fuck, man? Give someone a warning next time."

"My squeaky shoes on the floor wasn't warning enough?"

"I obviously didn't hear them. Fuck." He rubs the back of his head where he'd hit it on the metal shelving unit.

Yep, an irritated Ike is a fun Ike. Just don't tell him I said that.

"I'm going through the inventory in here, and stuff is missing. Either the day shift is getting lazy with tracking things, or someone on our shift is swiping them."

This is not what I like to hear. We've had issues in the past with staff taking things home. Normally, if it's a bandage here, gauze there, I don't really care, but when it impedes our patients' care, then I have a problem with it.

"What kind of stuff and how much?" I ask.

Ike pushes the clipboard he's holding toward me. I take a look at the items he's circled in red. Yeah, nothing major, but if we have an emergency, then there will be issues.

"If it's a jackass on our shift, I'll deal with it," he tells me.

"And I'll find out why it wasn't noticed on the day shift."

He gives me a nod.

I lift my chin. "Someone's on their way up," I tell him.

"Who?"

"Adrianna."

Ike's whole countenance instantly changes. His brows rise, his eyes widen, and he gives a low whistle. "Sounds like a fun time for everyone. You gonna talk to her?"

"Warden hasn't mandated it, and I doubt he will."

"That's not what I asked." Ike crosses his arms over his massive chest, his biceps bulging.

"For the fun of it, maybe." I wouldn't mind the shift going faster, and she'd fill up the time, for sure. "As for a deal, well, that depends if she has anything she wants to tell me, anything that's new. We all

basically know her story. She doesn't shut up about it."

He halfway snorts and laughs at the same time. "No kidding. That woman has never grown up past her glory days, although in a place like this do you blame her?"

We head back to the nursing station, and Ike fills up his cart to prepare her room.

"Bucket's room?" he asks.

I shake my head. "Give her the one next to it."

I don't share Bucket's room with just anybody. The one next to it is just fine.

By the time the elevator dings, announcing Adrianna's arrival, I'm ready for her. I sit back in my office and let Ike take her to her room and get her comfortable.

It's a bit before he returns, but when he does, he comes back with a huge smile on his face. "Yeah, she doesn't have long, but man, she's a real treat. Don't know what you'll get from her. She's so lost it's not funny. I'd feel for her, but in her mind, she's fine, so she has no clue." He takes a seat at his workstation and fiddles with the mouse to wake his computer screen.

"Sometimes I envy them," I say. "Considering their lives, living in the past must be a welcomed respite."

Ike shrugs. "My wife reminds me to enjoy the life I'm living, so that's what I do. Besides, these big feet of mine can't fit into many shoes, so I might as well get comfy in my own pair. You know?"

I slap him in the back. "Shut up with that shit. I don't need no Ted Talks from you."

The one-finger salute is all I get from him as I walk out of his room.

The floor isn't so quiet now. There's a low hum in the air, a charge of electricity that sizzles on your skin.

I stand in the middle of the hallway and take it in. I might hate the quiet, but I love this charge. It's addictive. It's that middle state. You don't know what's about to happen, but you know something will, and I prefer that state of mind all day, any day, if I'm being honest.

Our guest is all alone on her wing, which is a good thing considering the sounds coming from her room. Damn it, I need a shot of whiskey.

She must have been playing him.

I wonder if she's been playing everyone. Wouldn't surprise me.

CHAPTER FOUR

Some people have this insane ability to decide when their time is up. I don't know if they have this internal clock where they can hear the slower ticking sound or if they just decide today is their last. If I could determine when I would breathe my last breath, I would take that gift in a heartbeat, wouldn't you?

"Well, if it isn't the almighty Nurse Jackie." Adrianna has a cackle-type laugh, which she ratchets up about a dozen degrees the second I walk into her room.

She laughs even harder at the look I give her.

Everyone knows better than to call me Nurse Jackie. That last guy who dared ended up with a broken nose and dislocated jaw. He also might have been missing a few teeth.

Did I mention he was staff? Good thing he wasn't on my floor or a part of my rotation. He didn't last long here. No clue where he ended up, and I don't really care either.

"We're either going to play nice, Adrianna, or we're not going to play at all." I lean against the door jam. I refuse to step another foot inside the room until I know she's going to behave.

"Fine, fine." She rolls her eyes like an epic teenager, and I have to purposely look at her gray hair and all those wrinkles on her face to remind myself she's a grown-ass woman.

Well, this is going to be fun.

CHAPTER FIVE

ADRIANNA TO JACK

Well, hi there. I figured it was time to get up here and officially meet.

Am I what you expected?

Probably not.

I'm not everyone's cup of tea, that's for sure. I've got a few stubborn tires around my waist I can't seem to get rid of, and the wrinkles on my face look like a murder of crows used me as a welcome mat. Don't worry. I see them, too, but you're nice for not pointing them out.

I might not be your cup of tea, but I was someone's once, and that's what matters.

No one seems to care about that little fact.

Here's what I believe. When we find that someone who loves and accepts us for who we are, we should hold on and cherish them. Don't you think?

That's what all those diamond commercials say, and you know people on TV never lie.

The fact I was punished for doing what anyone else would and does do is crazy to me.

Oh, I'm sorry. Where are my manners? Proper introductions and all that. I mean, I know who you are, Jack, but what about me? Sure, you know my name. Of course you do. I'm Adrianna.

Sure, whatever, you've probably heard about me. I'm pretty famous in this place, I know.

You're pretty famous too. Did you know that?

But just because there are rumors and stories, that doesn't mean you know someone, right?

No one really knows me. They just assume they do. They hear my story and judge me for what I did.

You know what the crazy thing is? They judge me based on a set of morals we've all been brought up to believe is the only way to live.

What jackass theory is that? It's stupid, in my opinion, but no one asked me, so I guess it doesn't matter.

Nice place you got here, by the way. I mean, you couldn't spruce it up even a little? The one poster tacked up on that wall makes a world of

difference.

Let me guess. You had to use a poster because someone might get too trigger-happy with a glass frame, right? And it's probably just two-sided tape holding it up, not something anyone could use as a weapon.

Although with these things tight around my wrist, I couldn't do any damage with the tape even if I wanted to.

You're just as bad as my parents. They tried to keep me locked up too. Not that it made any difference. They even went so far as to put a lock on my bedroom door.

You know how that turned out, right?

I killed them, of course.

CHAPTER SIX

ADRIANNA

Do you remember being sixteen?

Sweet sixteen especially during the summertime? There's nothing like it.

I wish… I wish time would have stopped that summer, that I could always be sixteen. Youthful, innocent, full of life and possibility.

We take it for granted, don't we? Everyone does. Everyone thinks they'll always be that age while at the same time trying to outgrow it. You did. I did. Everyone does.

But if you could go back, would you? Unless something truly horrific happened in your life at that time, of course you would.

It's the summer of first. First job. First crush. First drive. First everything.

My best friend and I made so many plans for our sweet sixteenth summer. Everyone needs best friends at that age. They're the ones who mold you, shape you, and help you become who you really are.

Best friends share dreams, create new ones, and let go of old ones. They dare to do the things you wouldn't normally do, not on your own at least. They stand with you when you do the really stupid things or just the average stupid, too, you know?

You create memories with your best friend, memories that at the time might be painful, but when you look back, you realize those moments were exactly what you needed to be who you are today.

Nicole was that person for me.

Nicole and I would hang loose at the beach, play volleyball with the dreamboat guys, stay out late every night, and have as many bonfires on the beach as we could. This was prime time to make out.

We also needed jobs.

That was a rite of passage for that age. We both got jobs at the local ice cream shop, which was pretty sweet. We shared shifts, which was even better because we were literally together twenty-four-seven.

The only downside to that perfect setup was our manager. Frank was a real piece of work. Greasy hair, rotten teeth, slimy hands that liked to touch what he shouldn't have.

I could go on and on about Frank's disgusting and lecherous antics, and I will because it needs to be told, but this story isn't really about him. He does get his comeuppance, mind you, so be relieved about that… if you at all cared to begin with.

No, this part of the story is about Terry.

I mean he was the reason for everything. My reason for everything.

People didn't think I could love, that I didn't have that kind of emotion in me. The cops, the stupid prosecution, the endless string of fucking useless shrinks all determined I was some type of sociopath.

Everyone thinks I'm a sociopath, but I *loved* Terry with my whole being.

Can a sociopath love?

Let's be honest, shall we? A true sociopath only loves themselves. If they claim to love anyone else, it's because it suits them at that time. Maybe they're playing a role, a game, have a need to be met… A real sociopath doesn't have the capability to love anyone other than themselves.

Which, by all definition, means I'm not a sociopath, no matter what any shrink says.

Because I loved Terry. Loved him with every fiber of my soul. He was my world, my everything.

Why? The answer was and is the same. He saved me in every way possible.

The first time I met him, he saved me, and that, well, that was the start of everything.

CHAPTER SEVEN

ADRIANNA TO JACK

From that scowl on your stupid, ugly face, you're thinking there is no possible way this bitch loved anyone.

Well, you'd be dead ass wrong.

Terry was super fucking hot, and smart, and funny, and good in the sack. He was everything a girl could want in a guy.

He was also very good at other things as well like killing.

I learned so much from him in such a short period of time.

I bet you're also thinking that I blame Terry for what I did, for coercing me into it. I don't. Not at all.

At first, maybe. He did push me to do some uncomfortable things. He played with my feelings so that I'd want to do those things, things I begged to do toward the end, actually, but that was just because he needed to show me the truth.

You know what he did? He liberated me from societal shackles. That truth could only be seen through that pain and that blood that I happily spilled.

I see that now cleary, so fuck you, Jack, for making me feel guilty about loving Terry.

I bet no one actually loves you. Who would ever love someone as stupid, ugly, retarded as you? You piece of shit…

JACK HERE: She goes on to call me every name you can think of. Some I'd never even heard, especially not from a woman. It was quite impressive, truth be told. Disgusting, too.

CHAPTER EIGHT

ADRIANNA

Do you believe in fate? I do.

Everything in our life happens because it was meant to. Every action we take, every decision we make, every time we turn down an opportunity or jump at one, it all leads us to the same place—our destiny. Everything happens for a reason. I am a firm believer in that.

Isn't there a song about that? I can hear the tune in my head but can't quite catch the words or remember the title… Hmm, this is going to bother me.

***JACK HERE**: It bothers me too, truth to told, because she's humming the damn song, but she's so off tune she could be humming that zombie song, and I wouldn't know.*

Meeting Terry when I did was most definitely my destiny.

Those cliché moments of being at the right place, right time, right person, it's all true… although mine could have easily been construed as wrong place, wrong time, and absolutely the wrong person, depending on whom you ask. Not me but apparently everyone else in my life would say that.

That wrong place was at the beach. The wrong time was at midnight, and the wrong person was Brian White, a senior at the high school Nicole and I went to.

Ahh. Brian White. He thought he was God's gift, you know what I mean? The school and the town made him out to be just that with the way they worshiped him. Star football player, a stellar student, and of course, he was the student council president. Squeaky clean and all that. Everyone and their grandmother loved him.

It was all a facade. He was just as bad as every other boy in town.

But I, like every girl in school, wanted his attention, and I definitely got it that night on the beach.

Friday nights were always the busiest at the ice cream shop, and it was almost always parents with kids.

My parents used to take me there when I was younger, so I understood the excitement, but after working there, it had nothing to

do with it being a fun family event and everything to do with it being a way to shut the kids up by shoving ice cream into their mouths so the parents didn't actually have to do any parenting.

No judgment here. Trust me.

It was also a hot spot for couples out on dates.

Nicole and I were working together, counting down the hours until closing time. We'd heard that there was a party down at the usual hot spot on the beach, and we would be there, come hell or high water.

My parents were constantly on my ass about staying out late, demanding to know who I was hanging out with. This time, I'd told them that I was staying overnight at Nicole's after our shift. They believed it. They were so stupid.

Nicole's parents were beatniks and so cool.

JACK HERE: *In case you are of a different generation and have no idea what a beatnik is, let me save you from googling. A beatnik was someone who grew up in the '50s and '60s, was anti-materialistic, and were Beatles fans. Think of them as the original Swifties, and you'll get it. And when Adrianna says they were cool, she wasn't lying. These were the original cool people, bohemian, carefree, long-haired hippies… You get the picture now, right?*

Nicole told me that her mother even went to England to see the Beatles as a teenager. Like how far out was that? My mother would've never done something like that. Her idea of fun was playing Canasta or watching the Ed Sullivan show on the boob tube. So lame.

Anyhow, Brian came into the shop with his current girlfriend, Donna. I didn't like her. The girl was a real skank if you asked me. There had been a rumor going around school months ago that she was preggers from hooking up with some loser from the next town over. Obviously, that had been bullshit as her belly looked as flat as a surfboard.

Or maybe she'd had an abortion. I wouldn't know.

Nicole and I didn't run in the same circles as Brian. He was from a rich family. His father owned the car dealership in town. His mother paraded around preaching the ways of good Christian living, so it was a bit of a surprise when he came to the counter to pick up a couple of Cokes and then asked me if I was going to the beach party later.

Me. He asked me.

I wasn't going to lie and say that hadn't piqued my heart a little. What girl wouldn't want to be noticed by the golden boy of the school and town?

When I mentioned it to Nicole, though, she told me that he was only asking because he thought I would be easy.

That pissed me off.

Once our shift was over, we hurried to the beach like excited little girls at Christmas. It's embarrassing when I think about it now, but back then, with the blush of possibilities, I couldn't wait.

We spied a big bonfire, twenty or so people around it, drinking, smoking, making out. It reminded me of the photos I'd seen about free love and the degeneration of young people. It was beautiful, and I wanted to revel in all of it. I wanted to wrap myself up in every sin possible. I thought about how my church-loving mother would react to it all, which made me much more excited.

That excitement basically sizzled over my entire body.

Nicole and I each grabbed a beer, toked on the reefer being passed around, and let ourselves go for the first time in our teenage lives. It was liberating.

An hour passed by before Brian cozied up to me. Let me set the scene: his arm slung over my shoulder, the smile and twinkle in his eye as he stared down at me, his gaze roving over my body.

He told me how cute I was and that he would always think about me. At that moment, I wanted it to be real and honest. I wanted to throw it in Nicole's face that he actually liked me for me and not just because he thought I'd be an easy lay.

Turns out, Brian was just as greedy and greasy as Frank, with grabby hands and sexual thoughts in his mind and just like every guy to ever exist. Except for my Terry. He wasn't like any guy out there.

I ended up in the wooden lifeguard shack with Brian. It was just up the beach away from the bonfire. No one saw us leave together. I didn't think Nicole even realized I wasn't there. It was far enough away that no one would see or hear us, which was the point I realized later.

Silly me. I should have known better, and I did know better, but I never thought this would happen to me, you know? Most girls think the same believe it or not.

At first, he was very gentleman-like, complimentary, nice, and all that. A quick kiss on the cheek, a brushing of my hair back behind my ears, whispering sweet endearments that I actually believed.

Then, those lips gobbled up my mouth, and he pushed his tongue in. My hands were on his chest, and I tried pushing him back, but he was an athlete, a big brawny football player, so he was solid. I didn't really have a chance against him.

His mouth became bolder, as did his hands. While I kept trying to push him away, he tore at my shirt, his fingers meanly pinching my breasts. Then, his hand was down in my pants, digging for something that I had no intention of giving.

I remembered I started screaming. Brian's big, wide hand slapped down across my mouth, the side pressing against my nostrils.

Breathing became difficult. My head pounded, and my chest ached, and at that moment, I really thought I was going to die.

And that pissed me off. This asshole with bad breath, his limp dick rubbing against the crotch of my jeans, was going to be the one who killed me.

Fuck that. I could think of a hundred cool ways to die. Being raped and murdered by this jock who thought he was king shit just because he could catch a ball made out of pig skin and run with it without being tackled to the ground by another jock who thought he was king shit was not one of them.

That was when Terry showed up in that ramshackle shed on the beach.

My Terry. My savior.

CHAPTER NINE

ADRIANNA TO JACK

Ha! I bet you didn't see that coming, hey, Jackie boy?

Oh, sorry. Jack. Nurse Jack. Nurse Steen… or whatever you want to be called. Stupid titles don't mean much when you're at deaths door, you know.

Back to my original question. You've been wondering where Terry came into play, haven't you? Well, that's how. As my savior.

Brian got his just desserts, don't you think?

You'll be a hero, Jack, when you tell people about Brian. Nobody ever found his body. In fact, I'm pretty sure he's still considered missing. I saw a TV program about him once. What was it called? Oh, yeah, Without a Trace. I loved that show. They only play reruns now. Did you know that? I swear I've watched them all a dozen times. You'd be surprised how many of us know the real endings to some of those stories they tell.

Or maybe you wouldn't. Others, sure, but you… you know the truth about all us inmates, don't you?

Tell you what. How about I fill you in on the gory details about Terry and Brian? I know you get off on that shit.

CHAPTER TEN

ADRIANNA

Brian's pants were undone, his dick out, his hands tugging violently at my jeans to get them off so he could spread my legs and take what he wanted when Terry kicked in the shack's door.

I'd never been so happy to see another person in my life. At the moment, I didn't know who he was. I just knew he was here to save me, and that was all that mattered to me.

I didn't see it happen. It was so quick, and my vision was blurred by tears, but Brian went flying into the side of the shack. Terry must've grabbed him by the back of the shirt, yanked him off me, and pushed him to the side.

Brian's face was a mask of surprise, but it didn't stop him from coming at me again.

This time, I was sure he had more than just rape on his mind. His hands were reaching for my throat.

Everything after that seemed to move so slowly, like trying to move your arms and legs in water.

Terry had a small spade in his hand, the one you use to dig up rocks and buried treasure on the beach. He swung it at Brian.

The spade cut through Brian's neck. Hot blood sprayed all over me, over my hands, the front of my shirt, my face. I remember running my tongue over my lips. The salty taste of copper filled my mouth.

I didn't mind the taste, and I even licked my fingers for more of it.

Then, I started to laugh. Why? No fucking clue. It felt like something new and interesting had opened up inside of me. I liked the sensation. It made me feel invincible.

Terry made me invincible.

That night, he hacked up my attacker, you know, just to make sure he was dead. I blacked out after that, but later, Terry told me that he'd taken care of Brian's body and that no one would find him. I wasn't sure what Terry did, but I trusted him. If he said that it was taken care of and I didn't need to worry about it, then I believed him.

Afterward, Terry woke me up so I could help him clean the shack of all the blood. Then, he walked me home. Can you believe it? He

just murdered someone, hacked them up to pieces, cleaned up the mess, and then took the time to walk me home to make sure I was safe.

My savior.

I had to sneak in through my bedroom window, but I had perfected that years ago. Terry told me take off my bloody clothes, and he would dispose of them.

I never knew how he did it, but no one had ever knocked on the front door asking questions about Brian's disappearance.

It had been the talk of the town for weeks. The cops were stunned, as were Brian's family and friends. Nicole asked me about Brian, but I told her I briefly talked to him at the bonfire, but then he just up and took off.

I don't know what happened, but after some time, the cops stopped looking for Brian.

From that moment on, Terry was always there for me. He was both my savior and my teacher. He taught me a lot of new things about having fun.

The kind of fun that made my parents lock me up.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

ADRIANNA TO JACK

Oh, don't look at me like that, asshole. As if you know anything about me.

You don't know diddly squat.

My parents thought they knew me too. They always had that their noses up in the air like they just smelled the worst fart in the room and I was the one who farted.

Especially my mother.

She acted like she was better than everyone else despite the fact that we were blue collar rich at best. She always tried to impress the other old ladies in town, especially those who she went to church with. She had to be perfect with the perfect husband, the perfect house, the perfect daughter.

I was such a disappointment. No matter how hard she tried to keep me under her thumb, I never quite lived up to her expectations.

Guess you could say I'm the black sheep of the family.

You're probably wondering what happened with Brian, right? Well, the town went crazy when he went missing, I mean, he was the golden boy, the fav, so the rumors were rampant.

If only they knew the truth.

Everyone assumed he hooked up with someone. It was what happened afterward that everyone had a different opinion on.

No one thought he would have hooked up with a girl like me, though. I mean, let's face it. I wasn't really his type, and I was fine with everyone believing that. Terry had made sure of that. All anyone had was just rumors.

It was enough though for my parents to be assholes.

Just like you, Jack.

JACK HERE: She started to cough pretty badly at this point, so we took a small break. I didn't mind, though, as watching her cough her last few breaths over the next hour felt like just desserts, as she would say.

CHAPTER TWELVE

ADRIANNA

The next day during my shift at the ice cream shop, Nicole asked where I had gone. She thought that I was going to stay at her place since that had been the plan.

I told her that I'd had a bad stomachache, and instead of bothering her since it looked like she was getting all hot and heavy with one of the guys at the bonfire, I decided to just go home.

What happened with Brian stayed between me and Terry.

Nicole looked at me for a long moment afterward, her furry eyebrows furrowed together, making one big long uni-brow. I'd always told her to pluck them so she didn't look like Bigfoot.

It looked like she was trying to decide if I was lying to her or not.

Let's face it, best friend or not, she couldn't picture Brian possibly having an interest in me sexually.

She happily believed that I'd talked to him for only a moment and then didn't see him again, yet the way she started to look at me changed. It was almost discernible, but I could tell.

It was almost like she knew but didn't want to admit it, you know? Like a wife knowing in her gut her husband was screwing around on her, but ignorance is bliss, and sometimes, pretending is easier.

Whatever.

It didn't take me long to realize Nicole wasn't really my best friend. Everything changed between us after that night. We both tried to keep up appearances, but it was Terry who really made me see the truth.

Sometimes I wondered if she actually even liked me or if we were friends just because of our similar upbringing and circumstances. That's usually how it is with childhood friends, right? When you go away to college, how many of those friendships do you really keep?

It didn't matter in the end because I found a true friend that night. Someone who would do *anything* for me.

I came to realize that friendship was the purest type of love. Every day, you made a choice to be that person's friend. Every day, you made efforts to be with that person, to talk to them, to laugh with

them. Not like marriage. Not like family.

Marriage was a prison. Two people forced together for reasons beyond their control. Safety, security, procreation. I mean, my parents didn't even like each other. They just stayed together because that was what was expected. They stayed together for me, I supposed, to raise me properly in a proper God-fearing home. We were forced to be a family strictly by circumstance.

It sucked.

I hated having to put on the act every day, smiling fakely when my mom asked me how school was.

Thankfully, my dad didn't ask me squat. He was too busy with his bowling nights with the guys and weekend fishing trips where I'm sure he happened to forget about being a husband and father.

The one and only time he ever paid attention to me was when I mouthed off to my mother about something I can't even remember. He smacked me across the back of the head. That took us all by surprise, and he never did it again.

The fact that everything about my family was fake became one of the reasons I was able to do what I eventually did to them.

They made it very easy for me to tear them apart because they weren't even real. Not in any tangible way.

I met with Terry every night. After my shifts at work or if I had the shift off, I would sneak out of my house through my bedroom window to meet up with him. Our special place became the lifeguard shack at the beach.

At first, I found the choice unnerving. I kept seeing Brian's face as he attacked me, hearing his feral panting, and smelling his body odor, his sweat, and the musk he exuded from the violent lust he acted on. I didn't want to be reminded of it, but Terry assured me it was for the best. It would be a type of therapy so I could accept what happened and let the anger and rage build inside me. He said it would help me do what I needed to do next.

I didn't know what exactly next meant, at least not during those first couple of weeks of hanging out. Terry had a roundabout way of doing things. I just thought he didn't think I was ready, and he wanted me to be so I wouldn't get hurt. So I wouldn't get caught.

He was truly the only one who actually loved me.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

ADRIANNA TO JACK

Are you laughing, you dick?

I can see your lips twitching.

You better not be. If I wasn't strapped to this bed, I'd knock you right in your ugly face.

JACK HERE: I tell her I'm not laughing, but she just smirks and rolls her eyes at me again.

If you don't stop being a smart ass, I won't tell you the rest of my story, and I know you want to hear it. I can see you salivating at the idea of it. I bet you get off on this stuff, don't you, Jackie? I bet you take home all the stories you get and use them to beat your meat. You're a sick fuck.

JACK AGAIN: I try not to laugh at the irony of her statement considering what she did. It would only anger her more and prolong this. This time, I really want to get it over with. The less time I have to spend with Adrianna the better.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

ADRIANNA

Like I was saying, Terry and I spent as much time as we could together, which wasn't always easy considering my shifts at the ice cream shop, Nicole's nosy questions, and my parents constant nagging about me being out too late.

I was sixteen in a small town. Curfews were stupid, and I wasn't the only teen to think so. Weekends were meant for cruising down the main strip, going to parties, and having the best time.

Either way, they gave me a stupid curfew. I had to be home by ten even on weekends. Summers were for being free from restrictions. I had enough of the rules during the school year.

Sometimes, I wondered if my parents even remembered being young once. Probably not considering how rigid and religious my grandparents were. I couldn't stand even spending ten minutes with any of them. All their dumb questions and that old fogy smell made me sick to my stomach.

Thankfully, my mother's parents didn't live close, so I didn't see them often, only every other Christmas when we'd travel to them. But my father's parents lived in the same town and had their noses firmly up my ass and in my business.

In the hindsight, I should've taken care of them first. Maybe then I might have gotten away, like Terry. I let my conscience get in the way. It was stupid.

The times I spent with Terry were the best days of my life. We would drink cheap alcohol, whatever he could steal from the stores, and smoke cigarettes, and just talk about all the bullshit of the world. I would sit at his feet and just listen to him speak. He had a real cool way of speaking. I could actually feel his voice in my head and soul, you know what I mean?

Terry wanted to change the world.

He had great ideas about what society should've looked like. A society without ridiculous constraints placed on people. He thought everyone should have been able to live however they wanted away from societal demands and restrictions. Do whatever they wanted. Be

whoever they wanted despite their family background and requirements.

There were way too many rules and laws, man. We weren't supposed to live that way. We were supposed to be free of all that bullshit.

But the world wasn't ready for ideas like his. They were too radical, too subversive, too in your face.

At first, even I wasn't fully on board with a few of his more alarming thoughts, but over time, I came to understand them. I came to realize that he was so right to think that way. The world needed to be cleansed. Not in the old-world biblical style like a massive flood. That was too quick, too clean. No, it needed to be cleansed with violence, with blood and tears.

And Terry had so many interesting ways to do that. He even knew where we should start and with who to start.

I thought about Brian when Terry and I talked about "changing" the world. Brian hadn't really been the first or the beginning. He was more like collateral damage along the way. If he hadn't done what he did to me, he wouldn't have suffered the consequences. His death was his own fault.

I believe that now, but then, there were days Terry had to remind me of that. The guilt was real, but guilt is often laced with fear, something Terry helped me to realize.

I was thankful to him for that, for forcing me to face reality, and the reality was that Brian deserved to die. He was a degenerate low-life scum who thought he was at the top of the food chain.

And there were so many more Brians out there who needed to be taught a lesson or two.

I was a blank slate for Terry to teach me everything he knew about making those who deserved it pay.

As the days passed, I wanted to tell Nicole about what I was doing with Terry and learning from him. I needed someone to share my new thoughts with, and we'd been friends for years, ever since we were in grade school, so it was hard to throw that away.

Terry warned me to keep everything to myself. There weren't a lot of people who would understand our truth, but there was a part of me that wanted to bring Nicole in, to share this new part of me. I knew she'd understand.

Plus, I was lonely. Sure, I spent a lot of time with Terry, but a girl needs her girl, you know? I missed my friend.

You know, the more I think about it, I've been lonely most of my life.

I know, I know. Waah, waah, waah. Poor me. Poor Adrianna.

But it's true. I've always had an emptiness inside of me. Even now.

When I was a kid, I didn't know what that ache deep inside me was. Hunger or even boredom. The truth is, all my life, I've had this deep void right in the middle of my psyche. I hadn't really known it was there until Terry showed up and filled it.

During that time, I could sense Nicole's curiosity and confusion about the changes I was going through. I thought she was a coward for not just asking directly, but not everyone has courage.

One night after one of our shifts, she asked me if I wanted to hang out. We hadn't in so long, and of course I did.

Deep down, I was happy that she'd asked. I was still in that place where I wanted her attention, her validation. Like it was some hard-won victory, and I should've been proud of it.

Nicole and I decided to get someone older to buy us some booze for us to drink in the park. There were swings, a merry-go-round and a slide to play on. I remember spending hours in the park with Nicole when we were younger. The park was just about halfway between our houses, and we'd always meet up there on a lazy Saturday, sometimes on a Sunday afternoon after church. I figured the park would be plenty more exciting if we were both drunk.

Getting the booze turned out to be pretty easy.

We ran into our PE teacher, Mr. Gibb, as we hung around the strip mall near the liquor store. I told Nicole to ask him because I'd seen the way he looked at her sometimes, especially when she was wearing shorts for class. She did it albeit reluctantly after a long whiny session. She was surprised he agreed to buy us some beer, but I wasn't. I suspected what was in his old dirty mind when he looked at her. It was the same for most men.

When we got to the park, we each guzzled a couple of beer then went on the swings. I pumped as hard as I could with my legs so I could get as high as I could. At one point, I hoped I would just go flying into the sky, never to come back down again. I always thought this way when I was on the swings even as a little girl, but it was even more so since my encounter with Brian. The attempted rape. I had to keep reminding myself that was what had happened. *He* was the perpetrator, and I was the victim. Everything that had happened to him afterward was his own damn fault. Stupid asshole.

There are so many stupid assholes in the world.

That was one of my biggest regrets about getting caught like I did, not being able to deal with all those assholes and dishing out what they deserved.

I wish I could dish out even more in here. This place is full of stupid assholes.

Anyway, as Nicole and I swung on the swings, she started to grill me with questions. She asked me where I kept going after work. Who

was I with? What was I doing? She knew I wasn't going home like I'd told her on a few occasions. She'd called me, and my mother, who always answered the phone in the house, had told Nicole that I was staying over at another friend's house. Nicole knew that was bullshit as I didn't have any other close friends, something she liked to remind me of now and then.

I was really starting to realize what a bitch she was.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

ADRIANNA TO JACK

Was that a yawn I saw? Am I boring you, Jack? Not going fast enough? Spending too much time hyping things up?

Guess what, buddy? This is my time. These are my last few moments, and if I want to relive those days that now only feel like seconds within my life, then I damn well will. If you've got an issue with that, there's the door, and please, let it hit you solidly in the ass.

And yes, I know what that means. It means you'll be the dick who'll make sure I feel ever nanosecond of pain that courses though this body. I'm sure you'll give me a placebo or some other dipshit stuff and tell everyone it's the real deal, won't you?

Fuck it. I don't care.

I told you I heard the rumors. I know what an ass you can be. Don't bother looking away. Be a man and admit the truth.

I want you to know I have absolutely no regrets. Not about Brian. Not about Terry. Not about Nicole and sure as hell not about my parents.

I wish I'd had more time on the outside than in here, sure, but do I regret anything I did to get me here? Hell to the no, thank you very much.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

ADRIANNA

I never told Nicole the truth.

In the end, I knew she couldn't handle it. She couldn't handle Terry or his views on society. She wasn't tough or enlightened, and I knew that if I tried to show her the path, all she'd do was caught problems.

It wasn't worth it.

I think, bottom line, I was embarrassed to be still friends with such an innocent like Nicole. I mean, I get it. I was where she'd been, so technically I couldn't hold it over her but damn, the more I saw her, watched her, and listened to her, the more I realized she was just a sheep like everyone else.

Terry told me more than once to ditch her.

After the swings, we went on the merry-go-round, lying down on our backs as it spun around as fast as we could get it going. Looking up at the starry sky that night, I felt freer than I had in weeks. For a few brief moments, I thought maybe my life wasn't all that shitty, but then Nicole mentioned Brian, and again she questioned if I'd talked to him that night on the beach.

I didn't want to talk about him. He was old news in my mind. I wished she would just let it go. I knew she, along with everyone else in town, wanted to know "where Brian went" and why he "left town," but I was sick of hearing about it. If only they all knew what kind of guy he'd been, but I couldn't tell them without implicating myself in his "disappearance."

I told her I didn't want to talk about Brian and that I was glad that he'd gone missing. That had made her sit up and stare at me like I'd just grown two heads and was speaking alien. She couldn't believe I'd just said that, that it was mean of me, Brian was a great guy, and everyone was worried for him.

I snorted and said Brian wasn't really all that great.

I guess Nicole had a crush on him. I should have picked up on that.

She called me a few choice horrible names, saying how cruel I was and that I had no sympathy for others. She wasn't wrong, to be

honest.

Before I could say more and say things I shouldn't, Terry showed up in the park, and he wasn't happy.

You know how when you see someone mad, it changes thing for you? You'll see them differently than you had just minutes before. That was what happened right then.

Terry was mad. Like angry, really angry. Angry in a way I hadn't seen before. I mean, I knew he had rage, but rage and anger are too different things. At least, they are for me.

The rage in him I'd seen was when he buried a spade into Brian's neck, but that had been kind of emotionless. That was in the moment, reacting to what happened without thought.

Anger… Well, anger is all about the emotions, right? And let me tell you, all those emotions emitted off of Terry as he stalked Nicole. And stalk he did like a lion going after its prey. He was laser-focused, and the moment he was close enough, his hand reached out, and he yanked Nicole off the merry-go-round by her hair.

She yelped in surprise as he dragged her through the dirt. She kept calling my name, but I was absolutely powerless to do anything. I just sat up on the still-turning merry-go-round and watched as Terry smacked her in the face a few times.

There was nothing inside me screaming that I should have helped her.

She kept sobbing out my name and screaming, "Stop!"

I wasn't sure how I felt as I watched Terry slap the shit out of her. In one way, I felt bad for her, and for a very, very brief moment, I thought about helping her, especially since she looked so pathetic and weak on her knees in the dirt.

But let's be honest, I also enjoyed the shit out of her getting slapped across her face over and over until both cheeks were bright pink and some slight bruising just under her right eye started to bloom.

Again, I thought about getting up and stopping Terry, but I couldn't move my body. It felt heavy and soggy like I'd been drenched in water with thick wool clothes on, my limbs stuck to my sides, my legs too glued to the metal of the merry-go-round. Maybe it was the alcohol I drank making me feel weird. I didn't like it.

Terry slapped her one more time, this time splitting open her lip, and blood spotted her chin. My stomach roiled over. I was going to vomit for sure.

I rolled off the merry-go-round and onto the hard-packed dirt ground. Up on my hands and knees, I puked my guts out. It was a combination of the hot dog I had earlier at work and the beer we'd been drinking. I vomitted so much, it came out of my nose as well as

my mouth. I ended up choking then coughing, my guts churning still and pain stabbing me in the sides.

I could hear Nicole's ragged intake of air as she tried to suck in her sobs. I looked up to see her right next to me. Eyes wide, lips bleeding, cheeks slapped rose colored, she dug her runners into the dirt to scramble away from me, screaming at me not to touch her.

I didn't know why she was yelling at me when it was Terry who had knocked her senseless, but as I looked around the playground, I saw he was nowhere in sight. He'd obviously taken off when Nicole had started screaming bloody murder. I didn't know why she'd gotten bent out of shape. It wasn't like she was being murdered or anything.

I got to my feet, and stumbling toward her, I tried to offer a hand to her so I could pull her up, but she shook her head violently and told me to get away from her. Eventually, she stood, wiped at her snotty nose with the back of her hand, and told me that I was going to hell for what I'd done to her. I shouted back at her, saying she was crazy, but she wasn't listening, and she ran home crying.

That night was the beginning of the end, I guess you could say.

One of my mother's nosy old bitty friends from church saw what had happened in the park and told my mother. She lied, of course, and said that I attacked Nicole and beat the snot out of her.

Lies. Lies. Lies. I didn't know why she told my mom that bullshit. I knew she never liked me. She told my mother on more than one occasion that I was trouble and would amount to no good.

I have a few regrets in life, and let me tell you, not getting my revenge on that bitch is one of them.

When I eventually made it home, my parents were waiting for me in the living room. My mother paced the room, her hands wringing, mouth foaming, her skin scarlet red, whereas my father looked broken and useless as he slumped in his easy chair. It was obvious he didn't want to be there. He would never have won a father of the year award, that's for sure.

I didn't want to deal with whatever was about to go down, so I tried the easy way, head down as I approached the stairs.

If my mother had just let me past, things would have been a lot different that night, but no, not her. She always had to be in control.

She stepped in my way, getting right into my face. I laughed at her. I knew I shouldn't have, but come on. She was so angry that she had a very pronounced eye twitch as she shouted at me.

Apparently, I was unruly, willful, defiant, and—let's not forget—wayward. Spittle actually flew from her lips and landed on my chin.

I laughed so hard. Like oh-my-fucking-god is she psycho or what. I should have ended it right then and there, but damn, she made me angry with her words. What right did she have to talk to me, her

daughter, in that way?

I was angry, so very angry, and the alcohol burning in my guts didn't help much.

You know, deep down, I was and am a good girl, but I'm also a bitch when I want and need to be. I got it honestly, I guess you could say.

The idea was there, to do something, to make this all stop. It spun around in my brain like a brightly painted top, making me both nauseous and excited… but I wasn't quite ready.

Terry's voice filled my head. *You will be. Soon. Hang on. Be brave. This bitch will get hers, and you will be free.*

Terry's voice was soothing, like a lullaby. It calmed me enough that I just stared at my mother as she yelled, her tirade a bunch of mumbled nonsense in my head. I didn't let any of it get to me. It didn't matter what she said to me.

She was already dead in my mind, a rotting corpse, her mandible just moving up and down uselessly. I almost smiled at the thought.

My gaze moved over to my father sitting rigidly in his fat chair. He looked almost embarrassed by his wife's words and her behavior. I was surprised, as he'd always seemed so stoic, cold, and uninterested in his family. Maybe he still was.

You know, I always thought he would be the one to snap and put his foot down onto my neck finally. Not her. I thought he was like a volcano, just biding his time till he erupted.

Most of her words were lost on me until she told me I was grounded. I wasn't allowed to leave the house unless it was to go to work. No friends. No fun. No beach. No nothing. Just home and work.

Fuck that.

That was when I saw red. A crimson haze clouded my eyes, and Terry's voice was now screaming in my head. *Push her! She doesn't own you. She doesn't control you.*

I put my hands on her shoulders, and I shoved her backward.

Oh, god, it felt *good*.

Her shocked expression and her gaping mouth filled me with pure joy. My entire body tingled, seeing the fear of me in her wide, muddy eyes.

I knew I shouldn't have smiled. I knew letting her see my real self wasn't the right thing to do. Doing so made me vulnerable, exposing my inner thoughts and desires, but I couldn't stop it.

My lips curled up, and I gave her a huge, wide grin that exposed my teeth and my true nature.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

ADRIANNA TO JACK

Are you ready for it, Jackie boy? The main event.

All of it before was just foreplay. A little tantalizing treat to get you all hot and bothered.

Now, it's time to really get down to it. To the full on fuckfest.

This is where I tell you the God's honest truth about what I did and why in all its disgusting and gory details. Just the kind of stuff I know makes you hard.

Brace yourself, boy. It's quite the wild ride.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

ADRIANNA

Oh man, the look on my mother's face was priceless. I was sure she pissed her pants. The stench coming off her was a mixture of body odor from fear and the lard she'd used to fry the chicken for supper, sickly sweet and greasy.

Up until then, I had been a typical teenager. Sure, I mouthed off when my parents were being stupid and such. Who hasn't? But I never really crossed that line, you know?

There's always a line.

But fuck that line. I think I surprised them, too, when I decided to cross over it without a fucking care in the world, you know?

To say she was surprised is an understatement.

I saw fear, legit fear, in her eyes for a split second.

Despite that, she didn't back down. She told me again, her voice slightly trembling, that I was grounded for the rest of the summer. I gave her props for standing her ground however fruitless it was going to be.

I think I said something like "I fucking hate you" before storming out of the living room to go to my bedroom. I slammed my door shut, and that felt so fucking good! Slamming doors was a big sin in our house. Dad once threatened to take the door away if I ever did it, but damn, let me tell you, there's nothing more satisfying than slamming a door in the heat of the moment.

Am I right?

I paced around my room, interesting ideas swirling around in my head and fighting for dominance. I wished Terry was here to help me settle on the perfect plan. He would know exactly what I had to do.

Then, as if he had a telephone line right into my brain, he was knocking on my bedroom window. I slid open the glass and let him in.

Most people would probably think it was sexual between Terry and me, but they would be so wrong. We were connected, but it was and never had been about attraction. Our relationship was more than that. Sex is superficial, soulless. What we had transcended all that bullshit. In some ways, we were like one person.

That night, we paced my bedroom, sat on the floor, and bounced on the bed, anything to stay awake to think about the best way to handle my parents. I refused to let them control me any longer. I was going to free myself from their manipulation and subjugation.

I knew it had to be something easy to do. I couldn't go out and just buy a gun. My father didn't own one. I knew my neighbor did, but it would contemplate matters to go over and steal it.

We had lots of knives. My father had a few good hunting knives despite not ever going hunting, but it was hard to stab someone. Terry told me it took a good degree of know-how to be able to plunge a blade into a body in the right place that would be the most effective. It had to be a major organ, and I didn't know where any of them were located to be honest. I didn't just want to start stabbing without a plan. Besides that, it would be tough to stab one of them without the other freaking out and stopping me.

It had to be a method that was both simple and effective. Something they wouldn't see coming. Not until the last moment.

It wasn't until the witching hour, three in the morning, that Terry figured it out. All it took was a stray cat to jump up onto the windowsill. It had a dead mouse in its mouth.

Over the next hour, he constructed a plan for me. I was nervous as he laid out everything I needed to do and when. At one point, I told him I wasn't sure I could do it, but he assured me I had the guts to do it and that I was much stronger than I thought I was.

I loved that he saw only the best in me, what I could become, and not who I was right now—scared, weak, cowardly, a stupid little girl with no future except the one I was supposed to live.

Fuck that. I didn't want that future. I wanted more from life. I wanted to actually *feel* things.

Terry assured me I would feel every single second of what I was about to do. He said it would be euphoric.

After he left around dawn, I lay on my bed and stared up at the ceiling, too anxious and excited to sleep. I honestly wished I could feel like that again one more time before I died. The emotions were indescribable. Exhilaration would probably be the closest to explaining the rush I was feeling inside my head and my body.

The truth is, I'm getting tingles in my body from reliving it.

After laying there for another hour… I knew it was that long because I could feel every second tick by. I was so aware of everything around me—the air on my skin, the smells wafting around my room, the sounds of birds nesting in the tree just outside my window. And time. I could acutely feel that in my head. *Tick. Tick. Tick*. Like a bomb getting ready to go off.

I got up, dressed in regular clothes, brushed my hair, put on a bit

of makeup, and even put on the earrings my mother bought me last year for my birthday. Then, I left my bedroom and went into the kitchen to prepare.

It was early enough that my mother wasn't up yet to make my father breakfast like she did every day. I took out all the ingredients for scrambled eggs, bacon, toast, and jam.

I then went into the garage to get the final ingredient.

Once things were in motion, I thought I might feel too anxious to get it done properly, but honestly, I felt so unbelievably calm as I whisked the eggs in the big bowl, adding salt and pepper as I went.

I methodically crushed the white pellets I got from the garage in a separate bowl and then sprinkled them into the egg mixture.

I wasn't sure what it was going to taste like, if they would be able to tell with the first bite, so once I poured the mixture into the frying pan, I added more salt and a pinch of oregano. I was sure that the strong flavor of the herb would mask the other special ingredient.

I fried the bacon in a separate pan and put bread in the toaster. Once the pork started sizzling, my mother walked into the kitchen. The surprise on her puffy face was comical, and I almost burst into laughter.

She asked me with a slight stutter what I was doing. I told her with the best straightest face I could muster that I was making breakfast for them to apologize for my behavior the night before.

Jesus Christ, she just about cried in that moment. It was frankly pathetic to see.

My father then showed up, probably lured by the smell of fried crispy bacon. He silently slipped into one of the chairs at the kitchen table and picked up the cup of coffee I had prepared. I had sprinkled a bit of the special ingredient in there as well, mixed it well with milk and sugar. I pointed to the table where my mother's cup sat, telling her to sit and drink her coffee while I served the eggs, bacon, and toast.

Terry would've been so pleased to see how well I acted. I should've pursued that path. I would've made an enthralling actress. I could've been as good as Audrey Hepburn. When I was all dressed up, I could've matched her looks as well.

After putting the food on the table, I sat down and watched, trying to hide my excitement and anticipation as they scooped the eggs onto their plates, setting a piece or two of bacon next to the yellow lumps. My mother looked at me and asked why I wasn't eating. I told her I wanted to wait until they were done. Then, I would eat the rest.

For a moment, I thought maybe I'd gone too far with my pretending as her eyes narrowed in suspicion. I put on the biggest, brightest smile, hoping she would just chalk it up to my penance for

being a little bitch.

Finally, they both started eating the eggs. My father shoveled it into his hole, but my mother was more dainty, stabbing small pieces with her fork and gently putting it between her lips. It was the lady manners training on display.

In ninth grade, the school tried to push us girls into manner training. Some of the girls went willingly, but a few of us—me and Nicole included—said no thanks. We were not going through that bullshit. We told the establishment that times had changed, and they needed to change along with it. I'd been proud that day. One of the only days I think I'd been happy about my life.

Eagle eyed, I watched them chew and swallow, wondering how long it would take to act. I'd briefly read the back of the box, but of course, it was geared toward rats and not humans. I did increase the dose to compensate for the difference in weight and matter. Mr. Cutter, the science teacher, would be impressed with my gusto in getting it right. Yay for science and math!

Once they finished eating, I picked up the plates to take them to the sink, keeping my ears open for any sign of struggle or discomfort. As I turned on the faucet to rinse the dishes, I heard my father cough. I whipped around hoping for more. I didn't want to miss the show, the results of my efforts.

As he took a sip of coffee, thinking he could wash down the tickle in his throat, I watched, enthralled, as his eyes widened. In surprise? In pain? I couldn't distinguish them at that moment.

My mother was also starting to feel something. She shifted on her chair, her hand sliding down from her neck to her stomach. She cringed. The cramping must've been starting in her gut. Soon, that cramping would turn into a raw burning sensation that meant her insides were bleeding.

I didn't want to miss a minute of it so I sat back down in the chair next to her. There must've been something raw and greedy in my eyes as my father's gaze flitted over to me, and he instantly paled. His mouth opened. I suspected he was going to ask me what I'd done, but he struggled to speak. I imagined his throat was starting to burn like acid.

My mother's hands slapped down on the table. Her nails dug into the Formica as her body twisted and contorted in pain. I leaned in closer to her as a trickle of blood came out of one nostril then both. A trickle became a drizzle. I had to stomp down on the urge to reach out and draw my finger in the crimson trail over her lips and down her chin.

My father tried to grab me from across the table, angry harsh words gurgling in his throat. It didn't take much for me to pull away

from his reaching fingers. I laughed at him.

My mother leaned to the side and fell off her chair, forcing me to jump out of the way. I didn't want to get blood on my clothes.

Terry had made me pack a bag beforehand with some clothes, some money I had stashed from my job, and a few dollars I'd pilfered from my mother's purse and my father's wallet when they had both been sleeping last night.

Once they took their last breath, the plan was for me to put the box of rat poison on the table, sprinkle some dust on my father's hand to make it look like he'd killed them both. Terry said he'd read about a murder/suicide in a newspaper years ago. The cops were so stupid. They would never believe that the shy, timid teenage daughter had killed her loving, devoted parents.

I stood over my mother as she writhed around on the linoleum floor, clutching at her throat. Her movements made red streaks all over the white plastic.

My father had told her it was dumb to put white flooring in the kitchen as it would be hard to clean. He was right. Getting blood out of it would be tough, but it wouldn't be my problem.

She made a last-ditch effort to ask me for help. She couldn't talk, but she looked up at me with her dirty brown eyes pitifully beseeching me to stop the pain from clawing at her insides.

Instead of helping her, I smiled. That was when she rolled onto her side and vomited what looked like a liter of blood onto the floor. I had to take a few steps back, or it would've washed over my feet. Gross.

After violently retching, she sagged onto the floor like a rag doll done being played with by a child. I supposed I was the child in this morbid scenario. That suited me just fine.

I surprisingly had no guilt clouding my head when I watched her take in her last breath. Honestly, it was so liberating to be free of that limiting emotion.

I walked around the table to check on my father. Although his eyes were still open, he wasn't moving. There was also a pool of blood near his head. Crouching, I put my finger up to his nose to check if he was still alive. There was no puff of air on my skin. He was definitely dead.

Before I left the house with my bag and money, I planned to write a note to my parents saying I was taking the bus into the city to do some shopping and that I would be back by supper time. I would then take a bus but in the opposite direction. Terry thought it would be best if I went west.

California looked like the perfect place to escape to. I could be free there.

But as you know, since I'm here in this place with you, I never

made it to California.

In fact, I never made it out of the house before the back door leading to the kitchen opened, and my grandmother walked in.

Talk about a fucking mess.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

ADRIANNA TO JACK

You know, my life would have been so different if old Grandma hadn't walked in.

I've thought about that a lot.

Have you ever been to California, Jack? It looks amazing. You get every season in that state. Want to ski or build a snowman? You've got the mountains for that. Want to hike? You've got trails for that. Want the sun and the sand? There are beaches lining one whole side of that state.

People go there to live out their dreams, and man, I could have been quite the dreamer! An actress on the big screen… can you picture it? I probably would have been cast in all the horror movies, and I would have fucking dominated it too.

Maybe in the next life.

Maybe in the next life, I'll do things a little differently.

I don't know if I'll meet Terry, though. Part of me wants to. I want him to be part of my life, to mold and shape me earlier than he did in this lifetime, you know?

But there's another part of me that wants to live a life without Terry. What would that be like? Would I be a mouse-like woman or someone who knows her mind and power and takes control?

I think I'd like to find out.

Who knows, Jack. Maybe I'll come back here and haunt you in the afterlife. I mean, it's all up for grabs right about now, right? No one knows for sure what exactly will happen…

CHAPTER TWENTY

ADRIANNA

So, in walked my grandmother carrying her canvas bag stuffed full of yarn and her knitting needles sticking out.

It took her a full two minutes to register what she was looking at. The change of emotions on her face as new thoughts popped into her head was laughable.

If I had been quicker, if I hadn't been caught unawares, I would've grabbed one of those needles and stabbed it into her eyeball.

I didn't get the chance before she started screaming and ran out of the house. She was quick for an old bitty. I ran out after her, thinking maybe I could grab her and drag her back into the house before the neighbors were alerted, but unfortunately, that morning, the postman was walking up the street with a handful of mail for the neighborhood.

Grandma ran right to him, flailing her wrinkled hands about and spewing a bunch of mumbled unintelligible words at him. Again, I considered just grabbing her, but then I'd have to deal with him as well, and frankly, he was too tall and fat.

I stopped cold on the front lawn, unsure of what to do at that moment. I searched the area for any sign of Terry. I was sure he would come to help me escape, but he wasn't there.

I was alone, standing on the grass, a sense of bewilderment overpowering me.

I glanced down at my hands and noticed that there was blood on my fingers. I didn't remember touching either of my parents, but I must've. Maybe I really did run my finger through the blood coming out of her nose. Maybe I touched some when I checked to see if my father was still breathing.

Now that the situation was crashing down on me, a lot of maybes swirled around in my mind.

Even before I heard the sound of a siren as the first of five cop cars showed up at the house, I knew I was fucked. It was over for me, but I had some solace in knowing that Terry would never be found. At least he'd gotten away.

CHAPTER
TWENTY-ONE

ADRIANNA TO JACK:

There you have it, my full-hearted confession.

I hoped it was worth the wait.

And you were right. I feel better. I can go to my grave completely satisfied. I have no desire to repent. Don't think I need to. I may have confessed, but it wasn't for anything as mundane as redemption. Fuck that. Fuck you, Jack.

CHAPTER
TWENTY-TWO

JACK

Listening to Adrianna for that whole time was brutal. That woman is as messed in the head before death as she was when she first came in. I looked over her chart. That woman had been a mess.

Adrianna died at three in the morning. Witching hour.

Seems about right, don't you think?

I couldn't decide if she believed she was the victim in all of this. Terry, as real as he was to her, was just a person of her creation. Back in the day, they'd say it was multiple personalities. Now they call it DID—dissociative identity disorder. We have quite a few of those cases in this place. Adrianna is but a drop in the bucket.

I looked into the whole Brian White story. His disappearance is still listed as unsolved. It won't be for much longer.

About the rest of her story, killing both parents because she was grounded? Talk about cold.

PATIENT: MICHAEL

Deathbed Confessions of the Criminally Insane

Special thanks to Special thanks to William Adkins and Tracy Harrison for the name suggestions.

CHAPTER ONE

Ready for a joke? It's been a few confessions since I told you one.

Why was the serial killer so good at puzzles? Because they can always find the missing pieces.

Good one, right?

Why did the serial killer start a podcast? To share killer stories! (oh, this is a good time to plug my Only Jack Knows: Behind the Scene audios stories…have you listened to them yet?)

If that joke was about me, it would be "Why did the serial killer write a book?"

I have another question for you. Do you think I'm a serial killer?

Many on social media think I am. Hell, some of the patients in this place have called me one.

Am I? I guess the question really doesn't need to be answered.

This next confession is one I find interesting. There's always been something about him that has fascinated me. He's a quiet soul, rarely talks and when he does, it's often to someone who isn't even there, something I've witnessed a few times.

He was a young killer, one of the younger ones in this place.

He's not that young now. He died in one of the most horrific ways I can imagine—from pancreatic cancer. The only thing I could do when he finally came to my care was make him as comfortable as possible, and that was done by drugs.

Honestly, I was surprised he lasted as long as he did. I probably would have ended things a lot sooner if it was me.

More about our inmate. You remember that I don't use real names, right? A good name for this inmate would have been Cain, as in Cain and Abel, but we're going to call him Michael, after the archangel.

Michael was a ruthless SOB when he was younger. He calmed down a bit since being in here, but that was mainly due to drugs. In the early years, he wasn't someone to mess with. His chart is full of altercations and even deaths that he instigated.

Who he was fascinated me. Why he did what he did intrigued me.

I think you might feel the same way once you hear his confession too.

CHAPTER TWO

Some days are batshit crazy on the ward, and other days never seem to end.

I don't know what this shift is like. It's crazy and endless and fucking insanity all rolled in one.

If you work on a ward like mine, you get it. I know there are several of you who understand.

Maybe it's just me, or maybe it's that Ike is hitting every fucking button and the newbie he's training is a fucking moron. Why do they put these apeshits with me?

All I want is for this shift to end, stop at the bar to relax, and go home.

It's probably the extra shifts I've been working. Maybe I need a vacation, one that consists of me on a boat with a fishing rod in one hand and a cold bottle of beer in the other.

Yep, that sounds just about right.

"What sounds right?" Ike pops his head around the corner.

"What the fuck do you want?" I didn't realize I was talking out loud.

Ike growls at me. He walks into my office and closes the door with a bang. "What the hell is up with you, man? You've been a bear all shift, biting off everyone's head for no reason. Not cool, man."

He takes a seat, leans back, and puts his feet up on my desk.

Which he knows pisses me off to no end.

He's got a smirk on his face that is intensely aggravating, and he knows it.

"Before you kill me, I come with a gift." That smirk grows as he waits for my reaction.

I don't give him one.

"We've got one incoming, and it's someone you like."

Now, he has my attention.

"Let's make a deal. Two guesses but if you're wrong, I get to sit with him." One of Ike's brows rise at his suggestion.

I lean forward and push his feet off my desk. "That's not how this works, and you know it."

He stands and shrugs. "I tried. Still gonna give you the hints,

though. He had a younger brother, and he's a young one, late fifties or so."

"Fuuuuccck." I draw out the word. I know exactly who he's talking about.

Word of warning - we're going right into Michael's confession because things happened when I first walked into his room that we're not going to talk about.

And no, don't ask.

CHAPTER THREE

MICHAEL

I killed my brother when I was thirteen.

It sounds simple in a way, and when I reflect on it, it probably looked simple to everyone. To my parents, the police, even the media. *Teen murders his younger brother out of jealousy*. *Cain vs Abel. History repeated*.

There was even a movie made about it. I heard it sucked. No surprise there.

I've never seen it. I wasn't allowed to back then, and I haven't wanted to in here. Totally understandable, right? I mean, why see the fictional account when I lived it? The memories are still very fresh, very vivid in my mind.

It started with the woods. I was thirteen, an angry boy hitting puberty. That combination didn't mix well. I didn't know, not really, what I was doing or what I was listening to at first. How could I? I was only thirteen years old and full of this ever-building emotion that was beyond anger, an emotion I couldn't quite understand or even name. Some speculated it was just regular puberty, but trust me when I say there was nothing regular about it. It crept up on me slowly, a kind of sickness you can't feel until you're already lost in it. I think now that's what the voice wanted, to take root quietly, unseen.

We went camping every summer—my parents; my little brother, Gabriel; and me. I hated it, but no one cared about that because Gabriel loved it.

Gabriel was my mother's favorite. Anyone could see that. He was younger than me by a year, but up until now, he'd been taller than me. I'd had a bit of a growth spurt in the last year and finally stood above him, which was nice.

He was also softer somehow, with big, trusting eyes. My parents fawned over him—always watching him and worrying about him. I might as well have been invisible.

And the voice knew. It told me so. Y*ou see what they think of you,* it whispered in the middle of the night while everyone else slept. *They don't need you, but I do*.

It was so good to hear those words, especially during a time when it felt like I was invisible, like I didn't matter.

The first time I heard the voice was two summers earlier, when I was eleven, during another trip into the woods. I was bored. I wasn't into fishing or bird watching like Gabriel and my dad were. My mother tagged along with them like she always did, as if she didn't have a want or thought of her own. Instead of joining them, I insisted on doing my own thing, and I wandered off into the trees. I planned on going for a hike, to test my endurance and to play around with the pocketknife I'd pilfered from my dad when he wasn't looking. I'd gone walking on my own before but mostly stayed close to the campsite. I'd heard of people getting lost in the woods and didn't want that to happen to me. I wasn't sure if anyone would have noticed to be honest.

I was that invisible to my family.

This time, though, I hiked farther than I'd ever gone before.

After about fifteen minutes of trekking through the woods, I heard it soft as wind through leaves, coming from nowhere and everywhere. At first, I thought someone else on the trail was talking to me, trying to get my attention, but it didn't take me long to realize I was alone.

The voice came again, a whisper in my ear. It wasn't exactly words. More like a feeling.

Some people call it your gut. Others say it's their intuition, that small little voice. The religious folk like to call it the Holy Spirit, but then, as a thirteen-year-old, I had no idea what was going on. At first, I figured it was just me, my subconscious talking back to me, but it didn't take me long to realize that wasn't it. The voice wasn't mine. It didn't sound like me either. It didn't sound like anything, actually.

It would have been cool if it had an accent or sounded male or even female. Someone might have believed me if I could have described the voice, but I couldn't. It wasn't possible. The voice just… existed to put it plainly.

It wasn't part of me. It wasn't me. It was its own thing, a separate entity.

You're special, Michael. You can be more.

It would whisper words like that to me, the sound vibrating against my ears, creeping into my head. The more I listened, the stronger it became, and I liked the way it made me feel, like I mattered.

For once, I didn't feel invisible. For once, I felt like someone saw me, you know?

That's something we all want to feel, isn't it? That our existence on this planet has some sort of meaning. I wanted my life to have significance. I wanted to be important.

When I returned the campsite, they were all done fishing and my

mom was cooking dinner. Gabriel was playing with a stick while Dad was cleaning up all the fish guts and stuff.

Mom looked up in surprise. I can still see the look on her face. I knew she'd forgotten about me. For one brief moment, there was a look of guilt that wormed through her eyes, and then it was gone.

She asked if I had a good walk. I said yes. She asked if I found anything interesting. I said no. Then, I climbed into my tent and sat down on my sleeping bag. I grabbed a comic that I'd brought, but I didn't look at it. Instead, I brooded in silence.

Deep down inside, I wanted her to make a fuss about me being late in returning. I wanted her to be worried about where I'd gone and why I was so late. If that had been Gabriel who'd wandered off into the trees for hours, she would've gone ballistic.

But then, Gabriel never would have left on his own.

The voice told me Gabriel was too weak to venture off into the wilderness by himself. He was still a baby while I was learning to be a man.

That just made the voice more meaningful to me. Made me relieved that it had chosen me and not him.

That trip changed me in so many ways.

The voice stayed with me. It whispered to me at night in my room where no one else could hear. It told me stories about the forest and how the trees watched and the ground could remember those who gave it gifts. The voice told me it could make me special and important if I only proved myself.

I didn't understand what it meant at first. The things it asked for were small, just little acts of trust. *Carve my name into the trees*, it said. *Bring me shiny things you find*.

Whatever it asked for, I did. It gave commands, and I obeyed them.

I didn't know its name so I stood there for the longest time, waiting to see if it would tell me its name. It never did, but the moment my knife sank into the bark of that tree, it was like something took over, and by the time I was done, the word *Divad* had been carved into one of the large popular trees planted along the street right outside our house.

I'll never forget that first carving. Something rushed through me. A feeling of rightness. Of acceptance.

The voice asked for shiny things, and so I found them.

Over the course of a week, everything I found on the street while riding my bike around town I brought home and set it on the top of my dresser. A nickel. A bottle cap. A piece of quartz. A jagged piece of glass.

With each new object placed on the dresser, I swore the voice grew louder. It was pleased with me, and that made me feel good. Happy. It

told me that the world outside the woods didn't matter, that the forest was the only place where real power lived. I believed it. I was twelve, and I believed everything it told me. It felt like we were building toward something all this time.

That summer, when we went back, the voice was waiting. It was stronger now, clearer. It told me I was ready. The voice told me it was time to give something real. *An offering*, it called it. I didn't question it. I wanted to be good for the voice. I wanted to matter to it since I didn't seem to matter to my parents, or my teachers, or neighbors. To anyone really.

The voice said it needed something alive, something that would make the forest strong again.

It wasn't a suggestion. It was a demand. *Bring me something worthy*, it said. *Prove yourself*. It wasn't cruel, not the way I saw it then. It was a chance, a test. The voice said I could have everything if I just gave it what it needed.

I didn't think of Gabriel then. Not right away.

We were at the campsite, the one we always went to, and it had rained earlier that day. The earth smelled heavy, and the fire barely lit because the wood was damp.

I started to tease my dad about not keeping the wood dry beforehand, but instead of laughing with me, he snapped at me. He'd been doing that lately, losing his temper with me more and more.

With me. Not Gabriel. Never Gabriel.

Gabriel sat next to Mom, leaning against her shoulder while she brushed his hair back. In the past, she used to do that to me when we would watch TV together. That stopped a year or two ago. My dad sat on a tree stump by the fire, glancing at the two of them every now and then.

I watched them for a long time, and that was when the voice spoke again. *Look at him. Look how they cherish him. You don't need them, Michael. You need me. Only me.*

It wasn't jealousy, not exactly. Did it bother me that I seemed to be invisible to my family? Sure, it did, but it didn't affect me like it should have. Why would it? I had the voice now.

The voice was all that mattered to me.

I wanted, needed, and even craved the voice. It filled me with purpose, and listening to it was easy. I started thinking about what it said, and I knew that Gabriel would be the perfect offering. The forest would take him, and I would be rewarded.

I didn't know in what way, but at that point, I didn't really care. I just wanted to feel like I was important, that I mattered to someone.

Gabriel was an easy choice. He wasn't just my brother. He was my competition. The voice made that clear. I couldn't be special while he

was around. My parents couldn't see me because they were too busy looking at him.

But the forest saw me.

The voice chose me.

It told me I was stronger.

It told me I was chosen.

Looking back, I can see how easily I fell into it, how much I wanted to believe it. The voice wasn't just in the trees or the ground anymore. It was in me, like a second heartbeat. Every time I looked at Gabriel, I felt it grow louder.

He's in the way, it said. *You know what to do*.

CHAPTER FOUR

MICHAEL TO JACK

What boy doesn't want to matter? Right?

I bet you did. Every kid does. When you're forgotten, invisible, disregarded, that's when you lash out. Kids lash out for attention. Good or bad, they just want that attention.

Maybe things are different now. How the hell would I know? But back then, when I was a kid, I wanted and needed—hell, I craved attention. I wanted to be loved. Is that so difficult to believe?

I was a kid. What kid doesn't want to be loved?

You know what I've come to realize? Every kid needs a parent to love them, but not every parent needs a child to love. In fact, those that doesn't shouldn't even be parents.

I'm right, aren't I? You think the same, don't you? I know you do.

How many fucktards have been in this place that should never have been a parent? I see it in your eyes that there have been a lot.

My point is made, isn't it?

CHAPTER FIVE

MICHAEL

That night, while everyone else slept—my parents in one tent, Gabriel and I in another—I couldn't sleep. I wasn't tired. In fact, there was a buzzing pulse of energy that flowed through me, and it was hard for me to stay there and be quiet.

The voice didn't stop either. It whispered to me in the dark, urging me on, promising me things I can't quite explain now.

I don't even know if I could have explained it then either.

Power, maybe. Or something more than that, something eternal. I wasn't afraid. I felt… chosen.

The next morning, while we ate scrambled eggs and bacon—why did everything taste better out in the woods—I decided it would happen that night.

I made a decision, and everything in me told me it was the right one.

I wasn't going to be cruel. Divad needed a sacrifice, and he would get it, but Gabriel didn't need to suffer. He would just be… given back to the forest.

It was simple.

Divad said he'd be safe, and I believed it. I trusted it.

I didn't have to think much about it after that. Once I'd made the decision, it was like the forest took over. I knew exactly what to do.

Throughout the day, I felt like I floated through the motions. Dad took us on a hike to his favorite fishing spot, and I felt like I was one with the forest as we walked through. At some point, I couldn't even feel my body. It was like I'd become part of the air and earth, my essence mixed in with the leaves and the branches on the ground. The woods were there, and I was the woods.

Mom kept looking at my suspiciously a few times. She even asked me if I was feeling okay. She couldn't have been too worried about me, though, because she only asked a few times then left me alone, her sole focus on my brother and making sure he stayed close by and was never out of her sight.

Was I jealous? Sure. Did I let it bother me, though? Nope. Because

I had a plan, and the woods was going to help see it through.

When dusk came, I stayed close to Gabriel. I was kind to him and patient, more so than I'd ever been. Mom even smiled at us at one point, telling Dad to look how "sweet" I was being. I smiled back.

God, I remember that moment so clearly. Even now, it's bright and vivid in my memory.

If anyone had looked close enough, they might've seen something was wrong. An attentive parent would have wondered why I was being so uncharacteristically kind to Gabriel when I'd been surly and withdrawn for the past year. An attentive parent would have kept an eye on me.

On us.

But no one did.

So I guess what happened was on them, wasn't it? After all, I was only a minor. A child. They were the adults. They should have seen the signs. They should have loved me enough to realize something was off.

But they didn't.

CHAPTER SIX

MICHAEL TO JACK

Did your parents know who you were, Jack? Did they really know?

I highly doubt it. No parents do. It's okay. It's not your fault. It's just how it is. They probably had no idea that you would end up a nurse at this place, did they? Who would want their child to be looking after the most horrible people on earth?

They probably wanted more for your life.

Are your parents dead? What, no answer?

My parents died years ago.

Am I sad about that?

Not really. Not anymore, considering… Well, you know.

All I wanted was my parent's attention. That was it.

How I got it, well, that was on them.

CHAPTER SEVEN

MICHAEL

Here's the thing about little brothers. They want to be with you all the time. Everywhere I went, he followed me. Anytime I wanted privacy, our mother was telling me to include him.

Fine. If he wanted to be with me, then I was going to take advantage of it. All I had to do was wait for the right moment.

It wasn't hard to get Gabriel to come with me. I told him I'd found something cool out in the woods. He trusted me, and looked up to me with stars in his eyes. Of course he did. That's what little brothers do.

I counted on it to be easy, and it was.

When I asked him to come with me, he didn't hesitate. He didn't even ask why. I think about that sometimes—how easy it was, how simple. It should have been harder. It should have hurt. It should've sparked that place inside a person reserved for family, especially younger siblings, but I felt virtually nothing. Well, maybe not nothing. I definitely felt something, but it was impossible to name.

I still can't.

We left the camp quietly, walking side by side into the dark, careful not to wake our parents. The trees were still wet from the earlier rain, and the heavy air… you could taste it. It was cloying and salty and muffled our footsteps.

Gabriel wouldn't stop his constant, annoying, and beyond irritating chattering the moment we were out of earshot of our parents. The kid would not shut up. I still remember the things he said, how he rattled off facts about the fish in the nearby lake. He was like that. He would get something in his head and would have to learn everything he could about it until he was satisfied with it.

It annoyed the shit out of Dad. Mom loved it, I think. She had to. She was always encouraging him.

Gabriel followed close behind me, his footsteps crunching on the forest floor, small and tentative. His voice was also small and tentative. "Where are we going, Michael? How far is it, Michael? Michael, I'm scared…"

I think I gave some fucked-up response like "we're almost there" or

something like “It’s a surprise.”

I never looked back to see where he was, to make sure he was okay and close by. I couldn’t.

Eventually, Gabriel shut up. Eventually, he stopped saying anything at all. Maybe he sensed something was off, or maybe the forest had already claimed the words from him. I have no idea because I never saw his face. Not until I had to.

Coward. That wasn’t the voice’s word in my head but my own. I shook it out and ignored it. I had to. It was the only way.

I led him deep into the trees. Divad guided me step by step, as if it were walking beside me, unseen. *Deeper,* Divad coaxed me. *Farther.*

The night was still, the kind of quiet that presses against your ears and fills the spaces in your head. The air was thick, and the moonlight barely reached us through the towering pines.

All the things I should have felt, I didn’t.

I was calm, almost peaceful. I wasn’t scared. I wasn’t nervous.

I was ready.

The trees grew denser, their branches intertwining like the bars of a cage. My heart beat steadily, a slow, deliberate rhythm, like it was in sync with the forest itself.

I knew the spot when I found it.

The voice hummed a deep vibration that I felt deep in my bones. It told me I was ready. It told me the forest was waiting for my sacrifice.

When we reached the clearing, there was a sense of rightness. The air was heavier, the ground softer, damp with moss and fallen needles. The voice urged me forward, telling me what to do. It felt like instinct, like I’d always known even though I hadn’t.

I’d always wondered if my brother had felt the ominous, threatening hum of the voice then, too, because when I stopped walking, he immediately looked up at me with watery eyes and said, “I’m scared. Can we go back now?” His voice trembled.

I could see fear in his eyes, but I didn’t think he understood the reason for the fear. Yes, it was dark, and the woods were creepy and isolated, but I sensed his fear stretched beyond that. Maybe he realized his big brother wasn’t his protector any longer.

I said some soothing words to make sure he didn’t ruin everything. I needed him to stay put for a little longer.

Divad guided me step by step. It told me to draw the symbols in the dirt, to make the marks that would open the way.

Picking up a stick, I kneeled and began drawing, my fingers moving with a certainty that wasn’t mine. The patterns formed themselves, curves and lines that made no sense to me but seemed to hum with energy as they came together.

I didn’t even know what the symbols meant. I still don’t.

Gabriel stepped closer. I saw him out of the corner of my eye. “What are you doing?” His voice cracked a little, but he was curious, trusting.

I told to wait and that if he did, he would see something really cool. He was curious so I fed into that. He stood there, watching, and I could hear his breathing, soft and quick like a bird’s wings fluttering.

He shuffled his feet nervously. “Is this a game? Are Mom and Dad gonna be mad we’re out here?” His questions fluttered through the woods like the leaves rustling on the trees.

I didn’t answer. I couldn’t.

Once I finished the drawings, Divad’s voice filled my head drowning out everything else. It told me the words to say, strange sounds that twisted in my mouth like they didn’t belong there, my mouth and tongue moving in complicated ways. I whispered them under my breath then louder, repeating them until they flowed effortlessly like water over stones. I whispered them like I was in church kneeling at the altar and praying. Not to God, though, but something stronger.

Gabriel stood nearby but left enough distance between us. Apart and wary, confused but quiet. He didn’t understand what was happening. He didn’t know what I was about to do.

How could he? He was only a kid.

I’ll be honest. For a moment, I felt sorry for him. He wasn’t a bad kid. In fact, he was sweet and kind, bubbling over with innocent joy. Everyone liked him. Everyone cooed at him like he was some small helpless baby animal.

Which was the problem.

He was pure, and I, well, I guess you could say I wasn’t. Not anymore.

I wonder if I had ever been that pure. Sometimes with the way my parents, in particular my mother, looked at me, I probably never exuded such innocence, not even when I was a baby.

All the myriad thoughts swimming around in my head vanished in a second as the voice simply said, *Now.*

Without hesitation, I picked up the mid-sized rock next to my foot. It fit perfectly in my hand, like it had been waiting for me. The world felt impossibly still, the air thick and buzzing. It filled my head with static, so no single thought could form.

Gabriel must have seen the change in me, maybe the way I tensed or the way I gripped the rock. “Michael?” he said, his voice rising in pitch. “What are you doing?”

I didn’t answer. My head was still full of static, but I still heard Divad’s voice, louder now and insistent. *Now. Do it.*

Gabriel stepped back, his eyes wide, his small hands trembling at

his sides. When he cried, “Michael, stop!” his voice broke into a pitiful sob.

If I hadn’t been claimed by the voice in the forest, I would’ve found his cries heart rendering. I probably would have felt guilty for making him so scared too.

But I didn’t because of Divad. He was in my head. His voice, his words, thrummed through me, danced within my veins, and filled my soul.

I moved toward him, slow and deliberate. I didn’t speak. I didn’t think. His fear, sharp and electric, filled the space between us.

He begged at the last moment with tears streaming down his face. The last word I heard from him was, “Please…”

No other thoughts filled my head. I just remember the sound the rock made when it hit him in the side of the head. It was dull and sickening, like something breaking beneath the surface of water.

I remember the way he immediately crumpled to the ground, his legs folding under him, and the way the forest seemed to breathe in around me. It was as if it breathed for me because I couldn’t feel any air in my lungs.

The forest around me exhaled a deep, resonant sigh that echoed through the trees.

The voice didn’t speak, not right away. The silence was heavy and oppressive. It was like the forest itself was watching, waiting.

And then, finally, it came.

Good, it said. The word was soft and satisfied, curling in my ears like smoke. *You’ve done well.*

I stood there, the rock still in my hand, my chest heaving. The calm I’d felt before was gone, replaced by something I couldn’t name. Relief? Dread? Triumph?

Maybe it was a sense of pride that bloomed inside me at having pleased the voice. I didn’t think I’d ever felt this way before. Not hitting a home run in little league, not coming in first at the spelling bee in fourth grade, not making a jump across the creek on my bike. This was different. It was all encompassing and almost overwhelming.

I knew right there and then I would never do anything as important or profound ever again in my life.

CHAPTER EIGHT

MICHAEL TO JACK

Ho-ho, well, look at that. It's all true, isn't it? Everything I've heard about you… I wasn't sure.

You, Jack Steen, are dead inside.

I can't believe there's no reaction from you. No sympathy, no disgust. just empty eyes staring into mine.

I think we could have been friends, don't you?

Everyone else, when they find out I killed my younger brother, look at me with something in their gaze. Horror. Disbelief. My parents, the police, the psychologists I was forced to see, the lawyers, the prosecution, the judge. The media. Society.

A monster.

That's what everyone called me. They had to assign something supernatural or otherworldly to who I was to understand it. No one dared to see me as just a teenage boy who had murdered his little brother unprovoked, as if for no other reason than to see his brains come out of his head.

It wasn't that at all. In some ways, seeing the blood and gore on the rock and the ground had been horrifying and surreal. When I think on it now, it had to have been, right? I mean, how could such a young boy endure something like that without some reason?

Without first going insane.

I had to be nuts, right, to do something that dreadful and evil. I mean, maybe I was evil, am, evil, but at that time, I didn't feel any malicious intentions boiling inside my heart or mind. I felt only a sense of peace and calm. It was as if the forest itself had filled me with more love than anyone could endure.

So to get your look, now that's a gift. Bet you didn't think I'd be saying that, did you? But it's a gift because you are looking at me in a way no one else has, and at this point in my life, that's a surprise.

CHAPTER NINE

MICHAEL

Back in that forest, in the gloom, in the death-like silence, I stood over Gabriel's body, staring at the stillness of him, waiting for something to happen. Blood pooled beneath his head, soaking into the dirt. His eyes were open, wide, and staring, but they didn't see me.

I thought the forest would change somehow, that the trees would lean in closer or the ground would tremble with approval, but nothing happened. Everything was quiet, so quiet I could hear my own breathing, sharp and fast, like I'd just run a mile.

The voice stayed with me, though. At first, I thought it had abandoned me as soon as I'd presented the offering because it went so still, but I could feel it again, deep in the earth, humming like a secret only I could hear.

It told me what to do next—bury him. Hide him from the world that didn't deserve to see what I had given. Hide him so I could receive the bounty that had been promised.

I dropped the rock that I had been clutching so hard my knuckles were white and kneeled beside him. His face looked wrong, like it didn't belong to him anymore. At that point, it could've been anyone laying battered and dead in the dirt.

Or maybe that was when I started to lie to myself about the whole thing.

His eyes were open, staring past me, and his mouth was frozen mid-breath. I should have been scared. I should have felt sick or sorry or something, but the voice wrapped around me like a warm blanket, telling me this was right, that I'd done what I was meant to do. That I shouldn't feel any guilt. This was a righteous thing that should be rewarded, not punished.

The dirt was soft from the rain earlier that day, easy to dig into with my small hands. I worked quickly, scooping out a shallow grave under the wide, twisted roots of an old oak tree. My fingers ached, my nails tore, and my back hurt from being bent over for so long, but I didn't stop. The voice wouldn't let me. He belongs here now, it said. *Lay him to rest. He will be at peace.*

I didn't look at my brother as I hooked my hands under his armpits and dragged him across the ground. He felt heavier than I expected. He was so small. How could he weigh so much? It was like his body was holding on to the ground under him even after his spirit had gone.

I rolled his body into the hole. It was shallower than I wanted, but my body couldn't dig any more than it already had.

He landed with a sickening thud.

I glanced away then. The sound crawled into my body and wormed around my stomach, making it ache. The feeling was similar to when the bully at school made me eat rotten ham out of the trash bin. Nausea rose up into my throat, but I swallowed it down. I wasn't going to retch like a coward.

Once I pulled myself together again, I kneeled on the edge of the grave and pushed the dirt back over him. I kept pushing until everything I'd dug out was back in place, packing it down until it looked like a hole had never been there. I got to my feet and stomped all over it. My shoe sunk in a few spots, so I dragged some small branches and dried leaves to cover it.

When I was done, the voice finally spoke again.

It wasn't whispering anymore. It was louder, clearer, like it was coming from every corner of the forest at once.

It was so clear and distinctive that I whirled around to see if I was indeed alone. I still was.

You've done well, it said. *You are one of us now*.

I sat back on my heels, staring at the mound of dirt. For the first time, I felt the forest watching me. Not just the voice but the trees and the ground and the air. They knew me now. They accepted me. I was theirs.

I stayed there for a long time, waiting for the voice to tell me what to do next, but it didn't. It grew quiet again, fading back into the hum beneath my skin.

I realized I wasn't scared of the dark anymore. The woods didn't feel threatening or unknown. They felt like home. For a few moments, I thought about just staying there, lying on the ground, covering myself with dried leaves for warmth, but my parents would eventually come looking for me.

I wasn't ready to be found. This was my special place, and I didn't want my memories to be tangled with images of them here.

Eventually, I got up and headed back to the campsite. My hands were dirty, my clothes streaked with mud, but I didn't care. No one woke up when I slipped back into my sleeping bag. I lay there, staring at the stars through the thin canvas of the tent, feeling the weight of what I'd done settle inside me.

It didn't feel heavy, though. It felt good.

I rolled over onto my side, not looking at the spot Gabriel where had slept. It wasn't guilt that made me avoid looking but indifference. It didn't feel like anyone had ever been in that sleeping bag. It was as if I'd always been alone in this tent.

When morning came, I was the one to point out that Gabriel wasn't in his sleeping bag. I mean, I had to. It wouldn't have made any sense if I hadn't made a big deal about it. I called his name loud enough to wake my parents. When they emerged from their tent, I watched as their faces went from confusion to panic. Mom grabbed Dad's arm, already on the verge of tears, while I stood there, calm and steady.

This is how it's supposed to be, the voice said. *You are chosen.*

The rest of the day blurred together. I only remember my parents shouting and searching. Mom and Dad called for Gabriel, their voices cracking as they ran through the woods.

I stayed at the campsite while they ran around in circles.

If I'd been the one missing, would they have been that frantic? I didn't think so then, and I still don't.

After an hour looking, my mother's panic intensified, and my father finally called the park ranger's office. Within minutes, they arrived with three officers to help search.

By then, a few of the other campers in the area joined in. The ranger's dogs sniffed the ground, the ranger's flashlights cut through the trees. I followed along, pretending to look, pretending to care.

But I wasn't pretending for the voice. It knew the truth. It stayed with me, whispering its approval, telling me I'd done something no one else could. *I was special now*, it said. *I was worthy*.

I believed it.

By the second day of the search, the forest had swallowed the campsite entirely. At least, that was how it felt to me. The trails my parents and the others stomped into the underbrush seemed futile, like ants scurrying over ground too vast to comprehend.

The forest was too big, too old, too knowing. It wouldn't give my brother back. No one understood this about the forest. It was a secret only I was privy to.

It was hard not to smile about that, so I put my head down and kicked at the dirt, as if I was too distraught to do anything else.

My parents, especially my mother, refused to leave the woods. She screamed Gabriel's name until her voice was hoarse, sobbing into my father's shoulder as the sun sank below the trees. I remember standing near her, watching her shoulders shake, and I knew then and there she would never have cried like that for me if I'd been the one missing.

This is what they deserve, the voice told me that night. *Let them feel the emptiness they created in you.*

I slept better that night than I ever had even with the chaos all around. When I woke up to the sound of my father's frantic voice the next morning, I felt refreshed, ready for another day of pretending. It was almost fun, being the dutiful son.

The smart thing for me to have done was shut up and stay silent. I never said I was smart, though.

Instead, I suggested paths we hadn't checked, trails I claimed Gabriel might have wandered down. The adults followed my lead, desperate and grasping at straws. For once, they looked at me as if I had something important to say, to contribute.

Things between me and my mother changed. She was so fragile, so breakable. Her hands shook when she touched me, like she was afraid I'd disappear too. Maybe I should have.

"Stay close, Michael," she repeat over and over like a mantra, her voice trembling.

I didn't believe her, even though it was nice to hear.

She doesn't trust you. She knows you're different.

That night, we gathered around a hastily built fire, the search party dwindling by the hour. The rangers had started talking about calling it off, saying the odds of finding Gabriel alive were slim. They used words like "exposure" and "predators," their faces drawn and apologetic. My father argued, his fists clenched, while my mother just stared into the fire, still and quiet.

I felt something close to arrogance as I watched them scramble around, confused and directionless. They didn't know it, but I had done something extraordinary. The voice told me so.

Your gift will sustain you. You are marked now. Chosen.

I wondered if the voice had other things it wanted me to do. I hoped it would. I never wanted this feeling of triumph to fade.

On the third day, my mother started watching me differently. It wasn't overt, not at first. She would glance at me when she thought I wasn't looking, her eyes narrowing, her lips pressing into a thin line. She didn't say anything, not until that afternoon.

We were walking down a narrow trail together, just the two of us. The others had spread out, the air thick with their despair. My mother stopped suddenly and grabbed my arm. Her grip was harder than I expected. It was the sturdiest I'd ever seen her. I was a bit intimidated by her fierce demeanor.

Her voice was low, trembling, as she spoke to me. "Michael," she said, "Tell me the truth. Did you…" She hesitated, her breath catching. "Do you know what happened to Gabriel?" Her words were strong even if her voice wasn't.

I looked at her, meeting her eyes, and for the first time, I felt the voice pull away, leaving me alone. There was no whisper to guide me,

no reassurance to tell me what to say. It wanted to see what I would do on my own. It was a test. It was cruel, in a way, even to me.

So, I lied. I told her no, making sure to keep my gaze on her. If I could have faked tears, I would have.

Her expression crumpled, tears spilling down her face as she pulled me into her arms. I let her hold me, let her sob into my shoulder, all the while feeling the voice's satisfaction return like a dark tide. It took all I had not to laugh at the ruse I'd pulled on her.

Well done, it said. *You're learning.*

That night, back at the campsite, the rangers said they would give it one more day. My father argued again, his voice loud and raw from grief, but I barely listened. The voice, the one that mattered, was louder now, filling my head with promises I didn't understand but wanted desperately to believe.

When I finally crawled into my sleeping bag, I stared up at the shadows that the dark canopy of trees above me made on the tent roof, and wondered if the Divad was lying to me and if he would ever leave me.

Why would I?

The thought didn't scare me. It comforted me, and I drifted to sleep.

CHAPTER TEN

MICHAEL TO JACK

So, as stories go, mine is pretty tame, right?

One brother killed another and dug his grave in the woods. No big deal.

I mean, you must've heard a hundred stories over the years you've worked here.

Does get worse from here? Guess that decides on what you consider worse.

Life is a roller coaster, you know? And if you ride that coaster with shades, well, how you see things is different, you get me?

At the time, what I did was the worst thing my little town had ever seen.

After being in prison and then here, the stories I've heard… What I did was like a mouse leaving a turd on a pile of hay.

What I did and who I am, the things I've done since then… they're just everyday routine things to some people. To others, I'm their nightmare.

To you, I think my story is tame. Right?

Yeah, I thought so.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

MICHAEL

I still remember the moment they found him.

It's just as clear and vivid as the moment of offering. The way the searchers' distant shouts broke the monotonous hum of insects, how the wind seemed to carry their words directly to me. "We found something."

I was crouched beside my father, pretending to examine a patch of disturbed dirt along the base of an old pine for any semblance of small footprints. He stiffened, his head snapping up at the sound, and without a word, he was running toward the voices.

I followed at a jog, careful not to appear too eager but also not too disinterested, though my heart thudded against my ribs in a rhythm that felt strangely triumphant. *Thump. Thump. Thump.* Like a ritualistic drumbeat.

The voice stirred in my mind as I ran. It had been quiet most of that day, watching and waiting. Now it whispered, *They've come to see your work. Let them witness what you've done*.

The clearing where I'd buried Gabriel was smaller than I remembered, the grave shallower. One of the volunteers stood hunched over the disturbed soil, his hands trembling as he brushed dirt away from the edge of Gabriel's body.

My mother screamed, a raw, unearthly sound that echoed through the forest, bouncing off one tree truck to another, completely filling the space with her grief.

His face crumpling in disbelief, my father stopped dead before stumbling toward the grave. He looked like a drunk, awkwardly shuffling on unsteady legs to get home.

I hung back, standing just at the edge of the clearing. I told myself it was to give them space, to not intrude on their grief, but the truth was, I didn't want to get too close. I didn't want to see him.

The thought and feeling took me by surprise. I hadn't been squeamish when I'd caved in Gabriel's small head with the rock, so I didn't know why I felt that way all of a sudden.

Go to them, the voice urged, soft but insistent in my head. *This is*

the moment you've been waiting for. Look at what you've accomplished. Feel their sorrow. Feed on it. It is yours now.

I stayed where I was, rooted to the spot. My legs were heavy, my chest tight. I told myself I wasn't afraid—that I didn't regret what I'd done—but something in my stomach churned as my mother collapsed to her knees, clutching at the edge of the grave as though she could pull Gabriel back to her with sheer force of will.

I didn't want to be moved by her grief, but somewhere deep inside, I felt bad for her.

But not guilty.

One of the rangers was saying something to my father, his voice calm and measured, but the words didn't register. My eyes were fixed on the grave, on the faint outlines of the symbols I had drawn in the dirt. They were still there, faint but unmistakable, and I felt a strange surge of pride knowing they hadn't been erased by the elements that had swept through the forest over the past three days. It was as if they'd been carved into the earth.

They see your mark now, the voice whispered to me, a hint of satisfaction in its tone. *You've left a piece of yourself here. You'll never be forgotten.*

The searchers began pulling Gabriel's body from the ground, their movements careful, reverent even. I turned away then, unable to watch, though the voice laughed softly but cruelly at my hesitation.

Do not look away. You are stronger than this, it demanded of me.

But I wasn't strong. Not really.

When my father finally turned to me, his face pale and drawn, I braced myself for his anger, his disbelief, but he didn't say a word. He just stared at me, his eyes hollow, his hands clenched into fists at his sides.

My mother, though, she wasn't silent. She pushed herself up from the ground, her face streaked with dirt and tears, and took a shaky step toward me.

"What did you do?" She might have whispered that, but her voice trembling with a fury I wasn't expecting.

I opened my mouth to deny it, to say I didn't know what she was talking about, but the voice cut me off, sharp and commanding. *Say nothing*, it hissed in a tone I'd not heard before. *Let her break herself against the truth. Do not help her. Do not weaken yourself for her sake*.

For once, I wanted to argue against the voice. I wanted to tell her anything that would stop the way she looked at me, like I was a stranger, something dark and unrecognizable. Something monstrous.

I hadn't made this offering for my mother to hate me. I'd done it for her attention. Her love.

But I didn't argue. I swallowed my words, letting the silence

stretch between us until her anger gave way to something even worse —resignation. She knew what I was. She could see me truly and clearly for the first time.

The rangers began asking questions soon after, prophesizing how Gabriel had been killed. They pointed out the symbols, the unnatural neatness of the grave, the lack of claw marks that would suggest an animal had done this. They asked if I'd noticed anything strange the night Gabriel had gone missing, if I'd heard any noises outside the tent, if I'd seen or heard anything unusual in the woods the day before like an animal or another person. I shook my head, keeping my answers short, my voice steady. "I was asleep. I didn't hear anything."

"I was asleep. I didn't hear anything." What a good actor I was.

Inside, the voice purred its approval. *Good job. Let them stay in the dark. That's where they belong. It's not time for them to know the truth. Not yet.*

By the time they escorted us back to the campsite to rest, the air was thick with unspoken accusations. My father wouldn't look at me, his gaze fixed firmly ahead as we walked. My mother stayed close to my side, though she didn't touch me. I could feel her eyes on me, though, sharp and searching, as though she could peel back my skin and see the evil inside me that had allowed me to do what I had done.

That night, I lay in my sleeping bag, staring up at the shadows of the canopy of trees again. The outline of their branches seemed creepier than before, but I didn't know why. My parents had argued for hours after the rangers left saying they would be back with the police investigators. Two of them had stayed with the body so it wouldn't be disturbed any more than it already had been.

My parents' voices were muffled but unmistakably angry. I knew they were talking about me. Why else would they be so angry? They should've been sad enough that I eventually could console them, have them rely on me for their happiness again.

They know, Michael, the voice said, its tone almost playful, which sent an unpleasant shiver down my back. Why was the voice treating me so callously now? *They'll never say it out loud, but they know. Now they'll fear you. Isn't that better than being ignored?*

No! I almost shouted out loud. *You said I would be loved once Gabriel was out of the way!*

The voice started to whisper-laugh. It was a raw, grating sound that scraped at the inside of my skull. I closed my eyes, pressing my hands against my ears to block it out, but the whisper didn't stop. It never stopped, not even when I demanded it to.

I don't know when I fell asleep, but I woke in the middle of the night to find my mother standing over me, her face pale and hollow in the moonlight that beamed in through the open flap of my tent. She

didn’t say anything, and she didn’t touch me. She just stood there, staring, her hands trembling at her sides.

I wanted to say something to break the silence, but I couldn’t. I didn’t know how to explain what I had done or why. I hadn’t felt guilty before, but with my mother looming over me, her stance and stare condemning me to a hell that I was likely destined for, all the culpability drowned me in a pool of dark red, much like the blood that had oozed out of Gabriel’s head.

So I stayed silent, letting her look at me, letting her try to find whatever she was searching for in my face.

Eventually, she turned and walked away after obviously getting the answer she’d been looking for and hating me for it.

CHAPTER TWELVE

MICHAEL TO JACK

I miss my mother. I just realized that now as I talk about her.

I think if she thought she could've gotten away with it, she would've killed me for what I did to her baby boy.

Everyone has that dark side to them. You just got to put them in the right situation to see that side of them come out.

My mom, she had that darkness.

I wonder if I will see her after I die. Do you think I will, Jack? Although I can't imagine she would be lingering in the same Hell I know I'm going to.

Now, my father, that's a different story. I don't miss him, and I know for a fact he'll be meeting me in Hell when I get there.

How do I know this? He promised me he would. That's how.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

MICHAEL

The police arrived after a while, and they had all sorts of questions to ask, similar to the ones the rangers had.

Eventually, they told us to return home.

Mom asked about Gabriel, and when they said they would take care of him, she dropped to her knees, refusing to leave his gravesite.

I used to wonder what she thought staying there would do. Did she think that Gabriel wasn't really dead? That by some miracle, he would wake up and hold her hand like before?

Does any mother really accept it when their child is dead?

I wouldn't know, I guess.

Eventually, my father convinced her to leave, that we needed to let the police do their work and we would only be in the way if we stayed. He had to pick her up. I followed behind him as we walked back to our campsite. I don't think he even noticed when I climbed into the car right before he drove off. All he was focused on was my mother. He had forgotten me entirely.

Once again, I was invisible.

For the next few days, the house felt like it was holding its breath. The police came and went several times. Some days, they had questions. Other days, they had information to relay to my parents.

One of those days, they even questioned me. I didn't tell them much, sticking to the same story I'd said before.

Inside, the walls seemed to whisper with tension. My parents avoided me as if I were some poisonous thing they couldn't bear to touch. Their silence was sharper than words.

When they did speak, their voices were quiet and pressed low, but the weight of their words carried through the thin walls. Their heavy whispers always had to do with me.

"How could we not have seen this? He's our son, and we didn't see it." That was my mother, her voice breaking.

My father came back with, "You could be wrong. Michael would never intentionally hurt Gabriel. He wouldn't." He said those words, but there was no conviction in his tone.

It was a statement meant more for himself than her.

Her voice turned cold, sharper than I'd ever heard it. "Don't try to explain it away," she told him. "You saw him out there. You saw his face."

"It's stress. Trauma. He's confused."

The desperation in my father's voice as he tried to explain my actions or inactions was crystal clear. He wanted to believe I was innocent. I'll never forget that.

My mother, on the other hand, she didn't believe in me at all.

Since coming home, the voice that had told me what to do remained silent. I begged, pleaded, even prayed for it to speak to me again, but it kept silent. When I needed support and comfort me, Divad remained silent and cold.

"He's not confused," my mother said. "He's evil."

I pressed my pillow against my ears, trying to drown them out, but it wasn't enough.

She was right, but hearing her say it felt like a knife turning in my gut.

The next morning, my mother stormed into my room. She didn't knock. She towered over me as I sat on the edge of my bed, paralyzed by the weight of everything. Her hands were trembling, but her face was set in a mask of determination that I'd never seen before.

"Where is it?" she demanded.

I wasn't sure I understood what she was talking about.

Her voice cracked with emotion as she pressed on, "Don't play games with me, Michael. Where is it?" Her fingers curled into fists at her sides.

I didn't answer. I couldn't answer.

She didn't wait. She started tearing through my room, pulling open drawers, scattering my belongings across the floor. Her movements were frantic, almost feral, as though she couldn't stop herself.

I wanted to scream at her to leave, to stop, but I just sat there, frozen. My chest tightened with each drawer she yanked open, each piece of paper she unfolded and discarded. Still, I waited for the voice to console me, to tell me what to do.

Then she found my notebook.

She froze, staring at it for a moment before flipping it open. Her face turned pale as she scanned the pages, her lips moving silently as she read.

"What is this?" Her voice was barely above a whisper when she spoke. Regardless, it cut through the air like a blade. She didn't wait for an answer. She stormed out of the room, the notebook clutched in her hands like it was something poisonous. I supposed in some ways it was very much so.

I stayed in my room, paralyzed, listening as she called the police. Her voice was steady, though there was an underlying tremor in her tone that she couldn't quite hide. "I need someone to come to the house," she said. "It's… it's about my son, Gabriel."

His name hung in the air like a curse.

I knew what was to come next. I could've run. I had time. I could've easily have jumped out of my bedroom window and made a run for it, but I knew deep down inside I wouldn't have gotten very far. I had no money, and I had no place to go.

So I came out of my bedroom, sat down on the sofa in the living room, and waited.

When the police arrived, the tension in the house became unbearable. They didn't say much at first. They just took the notebook and started flipping through it. Their expressions were unreadable, but the way they glanced at me—like I was some kind of puzzle they were trying to solve—made my skin crawl.

My mother stayed in the kitchen, pacing back and forth, while my father sat silently at the table, his head in his hands. They didn't look at me. They didn't speak to me.

The officers started asking questions, their voices calm and measured, but I could hear the edge of suspicion underneath. They asked about the drawings, the symbols, the words scrawled in the notebook. I tried to answer, but my voice kept catching in my throat.

Fumbling, I tried to deny everything, although they really hadn't accused me of anything yet, though the words felt hollow even as they left my lips.

The officer's face didn't change. He just nodded, scribbling something in his notebook.

The arrest happened quickly after that. They didn't handcuff me in the house, but they didn't have to. The humiliation was the same.

When they led me out to the car, I could feel the eyes of the neighbors on me. They stood on their porches or peered through their windows, their faces masks of curiosity and pity. A few whispered to one another, their words indistinct but no doubt cutting.

Mrs. Parker from across the street stood at the edge of her lawn, her arms crossed tightly over her chest. She was shaking her head, her lips pursed in disapproval.

"He's just a boy," I heard one of the neighbors murmur.

"He wouldn't hurt his little brother."

I kept my head down, my face burning with shame I was just starting to feel. Actually, there were so many things I was just starting to face.

In the back of the police car, I stared out the window, my mind buzzing with thoughts I couldn't organize. My chest felt hollow, like

something vital had been scooped out and discarded.

This isn't how it was supposed to be, I whispered, more to myself than to the voice.

But it heard me. It always heard me.

You got what you wanted, it said, its tone cold and mocking. *You wanted to matter, and now you do. Now, no one will forget you. You'll be talked about for years to come.*

"No," I hissed, this time out loud. "You lied to me. You promised—"

I promised nothing. You made the choice. You did this.

Tears burned my eyes, but I refused to let them fall. I clenched my fists, my nails digging into my palms, the pain grounding me in the moment. Soon, a spot of blood trickled along the side of my hand.

For the first time, I felt the weight of what I'd done, not just to Gabriel but to myself, to my family. I'd destroyed everything, and for what? A fleeting moment of power? A whisper in the dark? An empty promise for a selfish boy?

The voice fell silent after that, leaving me alone with my thoughts.

As the car pulled away from the house, I glanced back one last time. My parents were standing in the doorway, their faces pale and haunted. My mother's eyes met mine for a brief moment, and I thought I saw a flicker of something—anger, grief, maybe even hatred.

Then she turned away, and I was taken away.

The world outside the car blurred into a smear of gray as the police cruiser sped toward the station. Rain drizzled against the window, soft and steady, its rhythm doing nothing to calm the storm inside me. I rested my head against the cold glass, the weight of guilt crushing me in ways I hadn't expected.

I didn't regret killing Gabriel. Not really. He'd been the key, the sacrifice that would unlock something greater, something I was meant for… only I hadn't unlocked anything. There was no power, no awakening, no sense of purpose. Just emptiness.

The voice had lied to me.

You lied to yourself, Michael.

The voice slithered into my thoughts, sharper and colder than ever. It wasn't the comforting murmur it had once been, the guiding whisper that had promised me so much. Now, it was cruel, mocking, and spiteful.

"I didn't," I whispered, my breath fogging the glass.

The officer in the driver's seat glanced at me through the rearview mirror, his eyebrows knitting together in confusion.

"I gave you what you asked for," I hissed under my breath, careful not to be overheard.

You gave Gabriel freely, the voice countered, its tone venomous.

Really didn't take that much to convince you.

I clenched my fists, my nails biting into my palms. The pain wasn't enough to silence the voice's hateful laugh. It was never enough.

By the time we reached the station, I was numb. The officers didn't rush me out of the car, but they weren't gentle either. The fluorescent lights inside the station stung my eyes, their harshness a stark contrast to the dim and muted colors of the world outside.

They led me to an interrogation room, the door shutting behind me with a soft, ominous click. The room was sterile, with walls so blank they seemed to press inward. A metal table stood in the center, flanked by two uncomfortable chairs.

I slumped into one of them, my body folding in on itself.

The door opened again, and I expected to see my parents. I was a minor. Surely, they had to legally be here with me for questioning. Part of me, the smallest part, had hoped they might come in, that maybe they would sit beside me, even if just for show, but it wasn't them. Instead, a woman with short, dark hair and kind eyes walked in.

She told me she was my child's advocate and sat across from me. Her voice was calm and professional, but there was a gentleness to it that set my teeth on edge as she explained that my parents decided it would be best that they didn't join me and that an impartial advocate would be best for me.

"They didn't want to come in. They're done with me." I said the words flatly. It wasn't a question, just a statement of fact.

Her expression faltered, and she looked away for a moment before responding, trying to placate me with empty kind words that I knew were false.

I told her that it didn't matter when really it mattered the most.

She didn't argue. She just nodded, her hands folding neatly on the table.

The officers came in next, their presence filling the small room. They were polite but firm, their questions measured. "Can you tell us about the drawings?" one of them asked, sliding a copy of my notebook across the table.

I stared at it, the symbols staring back at me like accusing eyes. My mouth opened then closed.

He said my name to encourage me to speak. I told them a lie. I told them I didn't know what the symbols meant or why I'd drawn them. My voice cracked with emotion.

The other officer tried to appeal to me with a soft coaxing tone. He tried to make it seem like I must've been under some stress, that I was maybe playing a game, playing around with something I didn't totally understand. That maybe it had all been an accident. A mistake.

"They were for the voice," I finally said before I could stop myself.

The advocate stiffened, her brow furrowing, but the officers didn't seem all that surprised. One of them leaned forward, his fingers steepled. He knew. He could see right through me.

The voice inside me laughed, a low, menacing sound that made my stomach churn. *They think you're crazy, Michael.*

"Shut up," I hissed under my breath.

The advocate blinked, confused. She wanted to know who I was talking to.

The officers exchanged a glance but said nothing, waiting for me to continue.

I clamped my lips together tight. The voice taunted me again, scraping at the inside of my mind.

I squeezed my eyes shut, pressing my hands to my temples. The pressure built, threatening to crush me entirely. I could feel the advocate's eyes on me, filled with pity, but it only made the shame worse.

You thought you were special. You thought you'd be chosen. You were lying to yourself the whole time.

"I wasn't," I whispered, my voice trembling.

The officer leaned in again and asked me who I was talking to. He asked me what the symbols meant and if someone had told me to make them in the dirt next to Gabriel's body.

I stared at him, my vision blurring with tears I refused to let fall. I slumped further in my chair, retreating into myself, but after what seemed like an hour of silence, I answered the rest of their questions with single words or blank stares.

In the end, I did confess to everything that I'd done.

By the time they were done, I felt hollow, a husk of a person. As they escorted me out of the room, I caught a glimpse of my reflection in the one-way mirror. I didn't recognize the boy staring back at me.

And for the first time, I wondered if my parents were right to look at me the way they did—with fear and revulsion. Maybe they saw what I couldn't. Maybe Divad was right.

Maybe I really was nothing, and no one would miss me when I was gone.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

MICHAEL TO JACK

That wasn't my only kill, Jack, but then, you know that, don't you?

The voice, it's never left me. It's here, even now. It's telling me to kill you, just like it told me to kill all the others.

Those boys in juvie. The men in prison when they finally sent me there as an adult. That stupid guard who brought me here to this hell hole.

I've never regretted any of those kills.

I did regret one, though. Do you know which one? I see in your eyes you do.

I regret killing my mother. Most sons do, I imagine.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

MICHAEL

I was twenty-five years old when I escaped prison for the first and last time.

There was a group of us, four in total. I was the only one who made it away without getting shot.

The escape itself was easy. We snuck out in utility carts that were loaded up into cargo vans. I was in a low security prison, and back in the day, bribing guards was easy to do.

Once we were in one of those cargo vans, we hijacked the driver, tossed him to the curb once we left the prison grounds, and drove into town. Everyone got off at a different stop. The plan was never to be seen together again, which wasn't an issue.

I left the van at a bus station and stole a car. No way was I leaving town on the bus. That was the first thing the cops would expect us to do. No, I stole a car and drove away in the dead of night toward the only place I knew to go.

Home.

The voice was back, urging me to drive faster, to get there before anyone found me. I drove all night and made it to the town I grew up in just as the sun started to rise.

Sneaking into my childhood home wasn't difficult. The spare key was in the same spot by the back door, hidden beneath a glass cigarette tray I'd bought my father as a birthday gift one year.

The shower was running upstairs. My father was probably getting ready for work.

While I stood in the back room, the kitchen light turned on, and I heard the slow scuffling of my mother's footsteps as she moved about, making breakfast for my father.

I quietly entered the kitchen and waited for her to notice me.

The voice told me to kill her, but I wanted to give her the chance. All she had to say was I love you or I miss you or that I forgive you. Simple words, don't you think?

Instead, when she turned and saw me standing in the doorway, she heaved a sigh and asked me what I was doing there.

That's all she said. "What are you doing here?"

When I told her I came to see her, she laughed. She told me I wasted whatever little freedom I had and she was going to call the police. She even picked up the phone, the one that hung on the wall. Its long cord snaked around the kitchen as she held the receiver to her ear while she made a pot of coffee.

She didn't act scared at all. I'll give her that, at least.

Make her afraid. The voice in my head was taunting me, pushing me, and I liked it.

I grabbed a knife from the knife rack on the counter and held it out. Her eyes widened, and her grip on the phone tightened, but she didn't freak out.

The police were on the phone. They knew I was there. She didn't smile when she told me they were on their way, but her voice didn't waver either.

She's not scared of you. She's the one in control, not you.

I ripped the phone from her hand and threw it against the wall. She stepped back until she couldn't go any farther. I approached, knife in hand, and I knew exactly what I was going to do.

I was going to stab her.

She called out to my father as I sank the knife deep into her chest. She screamed my name as I slashed her arms, and she whispered my name as I stabbed the blade into her over and over as she fell to the floor.

My father found me sitting on top of her, slicing into her skin, watching the blood soak into her robe. I don't think he expected the speed in which I stood up and ran toward him, knife raised, adrenaline charged.

Kill him. The voice told me what to do and how to do it, but I didn't need it's urging. A primal awareness flowed through me. The knife in my hand ended up in his belly, and I slashed it open with more strength than I thought possible.

Knees buckling, he fell to the floor, his hand on the hilt of the knife. Sirens filled the air, and any other person would have ran.

I wasn't any other person.

The voice told me to stand tall and to take pride in what I'd done, and so that's exactly what I did when the police burst through the front doors. I stood tall, hands high in the air, my smile wide across my face.

My father's final words to me as I was led in handcuffs out of the house? "I'll see you in Hell."

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

JACK

Michael died twelve minutes after uttering those last words.

For a moment, I wasn't sure if he was saying them to me or just repeating what his father said to him.

The man's folder is thick with incident after incident. He terrorized nursing staff in this place, maimed countless guards and staff… I'm surprised someone didn't take him out before now.

No one here is going to mourn his death. Five weeks ago, he throat-punched a nurse, killing her instantly when she tried to take some blood. She'd been relatively new and hadn't secured his wrists properly.

We have a saying here. "Stupid mistakes kill the smartest people." In her case, it came true.

Don't get me wrong. What happened to her was horrific. I doubt anyone who comes into this place is adequately prepped for what they're walking into. In fact, I know it. There have been way too many staff incidents, including deaths, because of stupid mistakes.

Some days, I hate this place. Other times… Well, I still hate this place.

PATIENT: BADGER

Deathbed Confessions of the Criminally Insane

Special thanks to Ashlee, Tammy Woods and Leslie Weimmer for helping to name those in this confession.

QUICK NOTE

The following confession you're about to read was spoken by someone with an accent and spoke like a hillbilly.

I kept how he spoke - so don't be going all crazy and complaining if you think something is spelled wrong or written wrong.

My editor and I discussed this at length…and I told her that you'd all behave…right?

Every time you complain, I get in trouble, so do me a solid - if you want to keep reading these things - complain to me PERSONALLY (via FB, my website, etc) and don't complain to whomever you bought/downloaded this book from okay?

Let's all play nice here.

CHAPTER ONE

Have you ever tried to put yourself in someone else's shoes and realized no matter how hard you try, that dang shoe just won't fit?

Sometimes I try this with my patients. Empathy and all that shit, you know? But there are just some… It doesn't matter what they say or how they act. I just don't get them. I can't wrap my head around their whys and becauses. Yeah, I know those aren't proper words. Deal with it. Their explanations and excuses just seem either too contrived or too on the nose, you know?

Some people try a little too hard for my liking.

I can handle those who are making shit up, especially when I know they're making it up, and they know I know, and they do it anyway. It makes things fun and interesting, and you can always find the nuggets of truth buried deep in those lies.

By now, you know I don't take everyone's confession.

Some I've been waiting years for. Some I'm forced to take because the warden gives me no choice. I say no to some of them when I find out they're coming to my ward.

This next one, I didn't want to visit with him. Hell, I didn't even want to see him, and I always kind of hoped he'd either end up dead before coming on my floor, or death's door would be during the day shift and I wouldn't need to see him.

It's not that he's bad. Well, he is, but I've met with worse folks, and so have you. It's just that there is something about him, something that pushes me away, something I can't quite put a finger on. I'll eventually figure it out, or maybe I'll just let him fade into the darkness eventually and not bother with it anymore.

I'm sure you've got people like that in your life too.

CHAPTER TWO

Oh, ready for another joke?

Knock, knock. Who's there? Ghost. Ghost who? Ghost to show killers never die!

Say it out loud. You'll get it then.

Badger is on his way out. That much is clear the moment I walk into the room.

The old man looks worse than I'd imagined him to look. His skin is hanging off his bones like wet paper, his eyes sunken so deep they look like bruises. His breath rattles in his chest, every rise and fall a stubborn refusal to give in—much like him, I imagine. I've seen it all before. This is what the end looked like. The only question is how long it would take. Days? Hours?

Does it make me a bad person to admit I'm hoping for seconds?

I lean against the doorframe, my arms crossed as I watch the steady tick of the monitor next to Badger's bed. I'm not here out of any particular sense of duty. My shift is almost over, and I could have been halfway to the parking lot by now if I were smart, but something about Badger keeps me rooted in place.

There's a strange air about him, something that clings to the walls like smoke. This isn't a new observation. It's something I've noted about him for years. Every time I'm in his presence, I feel like I need to shower afterward, scrubbing the filth that oozes off of him from my skin. A smart person would examine why he makes me feel this way, but we all know I'm not that smart. There are enough freaks in this place to fill a dozen books, and Badger is just one more chapter in an endless collection of human oddities.

I wish everyone felt that way about him. It would make my life a hell of a lot easier. I'll tell you that much.

"Jack," Badger croaks, his voice barely above a whisper. "Come closer."

Sighing, I push myself off the doorframe. I'm not in the mood for one of Badger's rambling stories, but what the hell. The old man doesn't have much time left, and I have a soft spot for deathbed confessions. There is something pure about them. They're stripped of

all pretense. People tend to get honest when they are staring death in the face.

Not everyone but most people. The ones I know who are lying, I listen for my amusement.

I pull up a chair next to the bed and sit, resting my elbows on my knees. If he notices my nonchalance, he doesn't show it. "What's on your mind, Badger?"

The old man smiles faintly, his cracked lips curling into something almost mischievous. His eyes glint with a sharpness that doesn't match the rest of his failing body. It's a look I haven't seen on him before. "I've got a story for you, one I've never told anyone. Not even the doctors."

I raise an eyebrow, a little more curious. "Oh, yeah? A big secret, huh? You know I love those."

Badger chuckles, the sound dry and brittle like old leaves. That is what cancer does to your lungs. It make them like crinkled paper "I think you'll like this one."

I've heard that line before. Every inmate thinks their story is the one that will shake me to my core. It rarely works out that way. Most of the time, it's just sad or pathetic or both, but something about the way Badger says it—so calm, so certain—makes me pause.

"All right," I say, leaning back in the chair. "Hit me with it."

Badger's eyes narrow, and for a moment, it looks like he is peering into some far-off place only he can see. His voice drops to a conspiratorial whisper. "You ever wonder what it's like to live in a house full of dead people?"

I blink a few times, not used to being caught off guard. "Dead people?"

Badger nods slowly. "Not just dead. Preserved. Posed. Like dolls in a dollhouse."

The hair on the back of my neck stands on end. I've been in this job long enough to know when a story is about to take a turn, and this one is already veering into dangerous territory.

And we know how I feel about haunted things.

"If this is a ghost story, I don't want to hear it."

"No ghosts. Just preserved dolls. I might be fucking psycho, but I'm sure as hell not delusional."

"Fine. Tell me what it's like to live in a house full of dead people," I say, my voice steady despite the unease creeping up my spine.

Badger smiles again, wider this time, showing yellow teeth. "It all started with my father's belt," he says. "That's when I decided I'd had enough, and once I started, well, it was easier to just keep going, you know?"

I lean in closer, all thoughts of leaving this room gone from my

mind. Whatever Badger is about to confess, I have a feeling it'll be something I won't forget anytime soon. I can already picture the rooms with preserved people being set in place, like a table being set for tea or a baby lying in a crib, the blackened body standing out against the white blanket.

I'm sitting here, waiting, and between you, me, and the cold walls of my heart, for the first time in a long while, I'm not sure I want to hear this confession.

CHAPTER THREE

BADGER

You might wonder how I got the name Badger. It was on account of how I was always diggin' in the dirt. Started when I was just a little thing, smaller than most boys. Mama said I was born with a streak of wild in me, like a critter you couldn't tame. I didn't mind. I liked bein' outside more than inside anyhow. Inside was full of screamin' and slammin' doors and Pa's belt hangin' on the hook like it was watchin' me, waitin' for a reason to crack across my back. The dirt didn't care what I did. The dirt didn't hit. The dirt let me do whatever I wanted to do to it without complainin'.

We lived in a house that looked like it was held together by spit and prayers. One of them shotgun houses. You know the kind, one room leadin' right into the next. Windows didn't shut all the way, and the floorboards groaned like they were tired of holdin' us up. The walls were thin, too, like paper, so you couldn't escape nothin'. Every shout, every curse, every cry just bounced around that house like it was tryin' to find a way out.

Pa worked at the mill when he wasn't too drunk to show up, and Mama did what she could to keep food on the table by taking in some washing or sewing from neighbors. My little brother, Beau Jr., and my sister, Emmie Lou, they were always underfoot, always jabberin' and whinin' and makin' a mess of things. I didn't have much patience for 'em if I'm bein' honest. I wasn't no good as a big brother. Beau Jr. was five years younger than me, named after Ma's pa, always trailin' after me like a stray dog. Emmie Lou was only a year younger than me, but she acted like she was the boss of the house when Mama wasn't around. I hated that. A lot. Sometimes I found myself mutterin' the same crap Pa did about Mama to Emmie Lou, but Emmie Lou wasn't Ma, and she always muttered back in kind.

I spent most of my time outside diggin' holes, climbin' trees, and tryin' to stay outta sight. I liked the feel of dirt under my nails. Made me feel grounded. Ha! Pun intended! I felt like maybe I could disappear if I dug deep enough.

I had a spot behind the house where I'd go to get away. There was

an old oak tree with roots that twisted outta the ground like bony fingers. I'd sit under that tree and dig. Sometimes I'd dig little tunnels and pretend I was buildin' a whole new world underground, a place where there wasn't no belts or yellin' or nothin' but quiet, a place I could disappear into forever.

Pa didn't like it when I stayed outside too long. He'd holler for me from the back door, his voice thick with whiskey. "Get your ass in here, boy! You think you're some kinda animal?" He'd always laugh after that like he'd made the funniest joke in the world, but I didn't care. I'd just keep diggin'. That's where I got the name, you see. Badger.

Mama tried to make it sound sweet when she said it. "My little badger," she'd call me, rufflin' my hair like I was her favorite, but I knew better.

Pa used it different. He'd sneer when he said it, like it was somethin' dirty. "You look like a damn animal, always covered in mud. You ain't right in the head, boy."

Maybe he was right. Maybe I wasn't right in the head, but I figured if I was an animal, at least animals didn't have to answer to nobody. Animals didn't have to say, "Yes, sir," or, "No, sir," while waitin' for the next whippin'. Animals didn't have to pretend everything was fine when the neighbors came by.

The neighbors, they didn't come by often, but when they did, Mama would shoo us outside, most likely so they wouldn't see the bruises and wouldn't ask questions as to why our faces were always dirty and our clothes tattered and torn, but I suspected they knew. We was all poor in that neighborhood, and sound traveled well and far some nights. I was sure everyone could hear Pa cursin' and shoutin' like he had the devil in him.

Some nights, well, most nights, I think he did.

On those days, I would take Beau Jr. and Emmie Lou out to the oak tree, tellin' 'em to keep quiet while I dug. Beau Jr. liked to dig too. He'd sit beside me, diggin' with his little hands, and say, "Whatcha lookin' for, Badger?" I never had a good answer for him. I didn't know what I was lookin' for. I just knew I needed to keep diggin'.

Emmie Lou didn't like the dirt much. She'd sit on the root of the tree, watchin' us like a queen on her throne. "You boys are gonna get filthy," she'd say, crossin' her arms like Mama did when she was mad. Emmie Lou always thought she was better than me, just 'cause she knew how to read better and kept her dresses clean. Well, cleaner than most. I hated that about her. Hated how she acted like she was smarter, like she wasn't stuck in the same shitty house with the same shitty parents living the same shitty, go-nowhere, be-nothin' life.

I guess that's when it started, the feelin' like I wanted to be left alone. Not just alone for a little while but real alone. Alone in a way where there wasn't nobody else to bother me, nobody else to tell me what to do or what I couldn't be.

I never said nothin' about it to nobody. Who'd understand, anyway? Nobody understood anything out here. I wasn't a learnt boy, but neither was anyone else.

The preacher at the church we went to on Sundays said bad thoughts were the devil's work, but it didn't feel like the devil to me. It felt like peace. Quiet. Somethin' I didn't get much of back then.

Most nights, I'd lie in my lumpy cot that smelled like dust despite the cleanish sheets Mama had put on, listenin' to the house creak and groan around me, the walls thin as paper. I could hear every word Pa said to Mama, every slap, every cry she tried to hide. Beau Jr.'s bed was in the same room as mine, and sometimes, he'd climb into bed with me, whisperin', "Badger, you think it's gonna be okay?"

I'd lie to him every time. "Yeah, Junior. It's gonna be okay."

But it wasn't. Not for Junior. Not for Emmie Lou. Not for any of us.

The lies were just easier to swallow.

It was around then when the slaps and cries got louder and more frequent that I started thinkin' that maybe the only way it'd ever be quiet was if they were gone. Not just Pa but all of 'em. Gone like they never existed.

I didn't know how serious I was about it at first. It was just a thought, just a little seed planted in the back of my mind, but seeds grow, don't they? All you gotta do is give 'em time, a bit of water, and a little bit of dirt, and dirt was somethin' I had plenty of. I'd been diggin' in it my whole life.

CHAPTER FOUR

BADGER TO JACK

Can you get me some water, Jack? I got a real thirsty right now. I haven't talked this much in years.

Come to think of it, I haven't talked this much since all those sessions with them doctors. Always thought it was funny that they stopped making me go. Probably 'cause there was nothing they could do for me. I was a lost cause. No way anyone could fix my head.

Some people don't need fixin', Jack. You get that, right?

Here's what I know. People go for therapy for two reasons—they like to hear themselves talk, and they can justify their actions to someone who won't judge.

Me, I would never have gone if I wasn't forced.

Therapy did nothing for me. No amount of talking. Don't matter how deep of a dive you do into my brain, there's no fixin' me. Not even those drugs helped.

Hell, that's probably why they stopped. Costs money to give out those pills, you know, so they stopped wastin' money on me.

Don't blame 'em. I've always been a hard nut to crack.

CHAPTER FIVE

BADGER

The first time I thought real serious about killin' Pa, I was sittin' under that oak tree with a bloody nose and dirt in my mouth. He'd caught me sneakin' back into the house after dark. I wasn't doin' nothin' bad—just out late, watchin' fireflies in the field, somethin' I often did—but that didn't matter none to him. Said I was bein' disrespectful and actin' like I didn't have to follow his rules. He had rules for everything, and breakin' any of 'em meant meetin' the business end of that belt he was so proud of.

I sat there in the dirt, spittin' blood from the buckle hitting my lip. There was a lot of blood. He didn't normally aim for my face, preferring to scar my back and sides, but he'd been particularly drunk and unstable that evening.

I started thinkin' how nice it would be if he just disappeared. I imagined it real clear—Pa lyin' on the floor, eyes open but not seein' nothin', his mouth slack and silent for once in his miserable life.

The thought didn't scare me. It didn't make me sad, neither. It felt like somethin' natural, like how you'd swat a fly that kept landin' on your face. Just a problem that needed fixin'.

I pondered on that for days.

It was there firmly planted in my mind as I did chores, when I had to run down to the local butcher and pick up a ham hock for soup Ma was fixin' to make, and it was there spinning around when I lay in my lumpy bed, listenin' to Pa's snores and farts coming from the other room.

I was so engrossed in my imaginin's that I didn't immediately hear Beau Jr. shout out from his bed. He had night terrors sometimes. I figured his dreams were full of monsters. Well, one monster in particular. I felt bad for him, but I hated that it was always left to me to console him. I wasn't his pa. I was just a kid myself.

I got up anyway and went to his bedside to grab his small, bony shoulder and shake him awake, but he jerked awake before I could touch him, mumbled somethin' that I didn't get, turned over onto his side, and fell back asleep.

I had to stamp down on the urge to pinch the back of his arm. I hated that he could just go back to sleep as if nothin' mattered.

Being the eldest, it fell on me to protect the youngins. What about me? Who was gonna protect me?

It didn't seem fair that I had to carry the burden of havin' been born into this life.

As the days passed and the thoughts grew bigger and faster like the weeds that had overtaken our front yard, I started to think about the how of it all.

Killin' wasn't an easy thing. I knew this. I'd snared rabbits and had to break their necks. I'd shot birds with a rifle, blowin' holes into their small, soft bodies. Once, I'd even accidentally ran over a stray cat with a tractor when I was out in the field helpin' a neighbor with the wheat harvest. I'd seen blood, gore, and broken bones. I'd even seen how Pa had skinned those bodies and stuffed them with sawdust, stitchen' them back up to make them look alive again.

I'd seen all that, and I still knew killin' wasn't easy, but that was all I could think about. It was the only thought that kept me movin' through the day.

As I went about my business, I considered a whole lota different methods of killin'. Each one had its good and its bad. Pa owned a few rifles for shooting birds and squirrels and whatever else stood still long enough to have a bullet put through it so I could easily get my hands on one, but they were also loud, and if I didn't aim good, that would be messy.

Along with those guns, there were a lot of good huntin' and skinin' knives around. A good poke in the gut or quick slice across the throat would do the trick, but again, it would be messy. Got to the point I supposed that no matter what I chose, it was gonna be messy. Stranglin' with a good solid rope would be clean but would definitely be harder to do more than once.

It wasn't long before the opportunity and means showed up, like it'd been waitin' for me to get ready.

Pa was workin' late in his workshop out back, like he did most nights. He had this old lathe he'd inherited from his daddy, and he liked to tinker with it, makin' useless little things—wooden spoons, bowls, stuff we didn't need. The workshop was his kingdom, the only place where he seemed halfway happy. This was where he also did some taxidermy. Nothing anythin' worthwhile, though. He just did it for fun. I think it was also 'cause he liked bein' alone out there, where nobody could bother him. Funny how we both wanted the same thing, but only one of us was gonna get it.

I realized then that Pa and I were a lot alike. The thought made my stomach hurt and pushed me harder to do what I had to.

I waited until it got real late. The house was quiet, Beau Jr. and Mary Jo sleepin' in their beds, Mama in her room with the door shut tight. If there had been a lock on it, I would of bet she'd have it latched, hoping Pa wouldn't bother to knock it down.

I slipped out the back door, barefoot so I wouldn't make no noise, and walked across the yard to the workshop.

The door was open a crack. Pa was hunched over the lathe, his back to me. He was concentratin' hard, mutterin' to himself like he always did when he was workin'. The sound of the lathe buzzed low and steady, drownin' out the crickets and the frogs.

I stood there in the doorway for a minute, watchin' him. I wasn't nervous. I wasn't scared. It felt more like I was doin' somethin' I'd been meant to do for a long time. I'm not gonna say it was fate, but maybe it was. Was it God who set this path for me, or the devil had? Mama had once warned me to not follow the devil into the darkness. Could she have seen somethin' in me back then? Either way, I was followin' it.

A hammer sat on the workbench next to the door, the kind Pa used to fix loose boards on the house. I picked it up, feelin' the weight of it in my hand. It felt good and solid, like somethin' that could solve a lot of problems.

Pa didn't even know I was there until it was too late. One minute, he was workin', and the next, he was lyin' on the floor, blood poolin' around his head. I hit him hard, harder than I thought I could. Once, twice, three times just to be sure. The sound it made was thick and wet, like smackin' a watermelon with a stick.

When it was over, I stood there for a minute, breathin' heavy, my heart poundin' in my chest. I stared down at him, waitin' to feel somethin'. Guilt, maybe. Regret. Revulsion even as the blood bloomed across the floor toward my bare foot. But there was nothin'. Just a calm kind of quiet.

I dragged him into the corner of the workshop, lyin' him out like he was sleepin'. His eyes were still open, but they didn't bother me none. I wiped the blood off the hammer and set it back on the workbench. Then I looked down at him, wondering what to do with his body so nobody would stumble across him. I couldn't let all my effort and hard work go to waste if I got caught.

I couldn't bury him in the yard. That would take too long, and I was too damn tired. I just wanted to go back to bed and dream about Sue Ann with the big titties who lived down the road from us. A year ago, she had been as flat as a board.

I decided the next best thing to do was to hide him.

I left the workshop and went to the back of the house where I'd stacked up a bunch of wood that Pa made me cut over the past few

weeks. The wood was for the stove inside the house and the pit we had in the back. Sometimes, as a special treat when Pa wasn't around, we'd roast marshmallows over the pit. I unstacked the wood pile, dug a little in the dirt with a shovel, and then went back into the workshop to get Pa.

He wasn't as heavy as I thought he'd be. Maybe 'cause I'd sprouted a bit during puberty, and Pa had made me do a lot of labor around the house. My body had grown strong.

Once I rolled him into the shallow dip I made, I stacked the wood back on top and took a step back to inspect my work. You would have to be really looking to find him. I figured no one would really be looking hard. He wasn't work the effort.

Then, I went back inside, washed my hands, and climbed into bed. Best night sleep I'd had in a long time, let me tell you.

CHAPTER SIX

BADGER TO JACK

Can you remember the exact day you became a man, Jack?

I can.

It was that day. That hour. That moment. I'll never forget it.

That calm quiet, it's followed me everywhere.

That's how I know it was the right thing to do.

You don't judge me, do you?

I don't quite think things through, and I'll admit that, man to man. That was the one mistake I'd made, but sometimes, life don't deserve plannin', you get me? Sometimes, all life needs is you go to with the flow and feel. Be.

I was in the moment, and it felt good.

CHAPTER SEVEN

BADGER

The next morning, Mama asked where Pa was. I shrugged and said I didn't know. She figured he'd gone into town early or maybe had stopped at the bar like he did sometimes, but when he didn't come back that night, she started to worry. I wanted to tell her to stop worrying, that it was good that he was gone, but like a caged animal, she'd gotten used to her captor. By the third day, she called the sheriff.

The sheriff came by and asked me a bunch of questions. Where'd I seen Pa last? Did he say anything strange? I told him I'd seen Pa headin' toward the woods and said maybe he'd gone huntin' and got lost. The sheriff seemed to believe me. Why wouldn't he? I was just a kid after all. Kids don't lie to the sheriff, especially when it's about their daddy's well being. I made sure to look like a son worried about his pa.

They searched the woods for a couple of days, but they didn't find nothin'. They had no reason to search the house and yard. Why would they when we were all so worried for Pa?

Eventually, they gave up. Said Pa must've run off and left us for good. It wasn't the first time a man in town had up and left his family without a word.

Folks shook their heads and muttered about what a no-good son of a bitch he was, and that was the end of it.

Mama cried for a while. I held her hand while she shed those tears, but I think she was more relieved than sad.

Without Pa around, things got quieter and easier. For a little while, anyway.

But quiet don't last long when you've got a house full of people who don't know how to shut up. Beau Jr. and Mary Jo were always makin' noise, always wantin' somethin'.

Mama started leanin' on me more, askin' me to watch 'em while she tried to figure out how to make ends meet. I hated it. Hated havin' to take care of 'em and listen to their whinin', their laughin', their constant talkin'.

I ain't their daddy. I was a kid myself. I wanted to go off and shoot squirrels with my friend, Stu or make hooch with the older guys in town, drink it, and get pissed off my gills, just like Pa. But I couldn't do nothin' like that. I had to be the grown up for everybody.

One night, I was sittin' under the oak tree, thinkin' about Pa and how easy it had been. That's when the thought came back, stronger this time.

What if they were all gone?

Not just Pa. All of 'em.

The house would be quiet. Peaceful. Just me and the dirt.

The seed had taken root, and now, it was growin' fast, spreadin' like a weed through my brain. I couldn't stop thinkin' about it. I didn't want to stop.

It was just a matter of time.

I don't remember exactly when I made up my mind. It was like the thought had always been there, just waitin' for me to notice it. The house was too crowded, too loud, too full of people who didn't know how to leave me be. I wasn't mad at 'em. Well, not exactly. It wasn't about revenge or hate. It was just somethin' I had to do. A cleanin' up, you might say. Like pullin' weeds from the garden so the real plants could breathe.

The first one was Mary Jo. She was always the loudest, always askin' questions, always singin' little songs, hummin' to herself while she played with her dolls. I told her to hush a hundred times a day, but she never listened so one night, I decided it was time to put a stop to it.

She was sleepin' in her little bed, curled up with her raggedy doll, her thumb stuck in her mouth. She started that again after Pa. She looked peaceful, almost sweet. I thought maybe that would make it hard, but it didn't. I just stood there for a minute, watchin' her breathe. Then, I put the pillow over her face and pressed down.

She kicked a little but not for long. When she stopped movin', I lifted the pillow and stared at her. She looked like she was still sleepin', only quieter. Better.

I left her in her bed, tucking her doll under her arm and pulling the cover up to her chin. There was a bit of a chill in the room. No surprise considerin' how paper thin the walls were.

Beau Jr. was next. He was harder. Not 'cause I felt bad for him but 'cause he fought. He was a scrappy little thing, always wrigglin' and kickin'. When I walked back into our shared room with the pillow, he woke up right away. Not sure why. I hadn't made any noise. He usually slept through anything—Pa shouting, Mama screaming, even thunderstorms.

"What're you doin', Badger?" he asked, rubbin' his eyes.

“Nothin’, Beau Jr.,” I said. “Go back to sleep.”

But he didn’t. He sat up, lookin’ at me with those big eyes of his. He must’ve seen somethin’ in my face ‘cause he tried to bolt, but I grabbed him, wrestled him down, and pressed the pillow over his face like I did with Mary Jo. He thrashed and kicked. His knee came up and hit me in the side. I nearly lost my grip there, but I held on tight.

When it was over, I was sweatin’ and breathin’ hard. I thought about leaving him there like I did with Mary Jo, but he looked so small and vulnerable so I picked him up and carried him into her room. I set him on the bed next to her for comfort.

When they’d been littler, they used to often cuddle together, but Pa put a stop to that, sayin’ it wasn’t right. I hated that he made that innocent moment of comfort into somethin’ sinful.

That had always sat wrong with me considerin’ he sinned more than most—drinking, beatin’ on his family, messin’ around with other women on the side.

Thinkin’ on it almost made me want to go back to the wood pile and bash him in the head again, but I still had work to do.

Mama was last.

Mama.

I thought about leavin’ her for a while. She wasn’t so bad most days, and I figured she might be able to manage on her own. Then, I thought about how she’d cry and carry on when she found Beau Jr. and Mary Jo, how she’d call the sheriff, and how things would get real messy real quick.

No, it wouldn’t work. If I was gonna do this, I had to do it right. No loose ends.

She was sittin’ at the kitchen table, smokin’ one of her menthols and starin’ out the window. Probably thinkin’ about Pa, which made me so angry.

I walked up behind her real quiet.

“Badger, what are you doin’ up so late?” she asked without turnin’ around.

“Just thinkin’,” I said.

“That so? ‘Bout what?” She took another slow drag on her cigarette and let the smoke curl out from her lips and nose.

I grabbed the cast iron skillet off the stove. It was heavy in my hands, but it felt right, like it was meant for this.

I brought it down hard on the back of her head. She made a thick wet sound, kinda like a grunt, then slumped forward onto the table. Her cigarette rolled onto the table, the smoke trailing it like a snake.

I hit her again just to be sure. Blood seeped into the wood grain, dark and sticky. I stood there for a minute, watchin’ it spread. It

reminded me of syrup on Sunday mornin' pancakes, thick and slow.

I plucked the cigarette from the table and mashed it into the ashtray to put it out. Couldn't have a fire now, could we? The place was so old and worn and thin it would burn to ashes in minutes.

It was quiet after that. Real quiet. The quiet I'd been wantin' for as long as I could remember.

For the first time, the house felt like it belonged to me. No more yellin'. No more cryin'. No more rules. Just me and the stillness.

I kept it that way for months.

Now you might be thinking I just left them like that, rotting where I killed them, but that would of been cruel.

I took care of them still and made sure they stayed nice.

Besides, I had a bigger plan, somethin' better than just killin' 'em and walkin' away. No, I needed to make 'em last. Needed to make 'em perfect. We couldn't be a big happy family if we weren't all still together. Just 'cause I wanted them quiet didn't mean I wanted to be left alone. I was still a kid. I still needed my mama and pa.

I didn't have a proper taxidermy kit or nothin'. Pa had some stuff in the workshop that he would use to mount roadkill he found now and again. I knew how to work with my hands. Pa had taught me good about hard labor, and when you're determined like I was, you don't need fancy tools.

I started with Beau Jr., by pulling his clothes off—dirty, smelly from all the sweat and the bodily fluids that had come out of 'im when I'd suffocated 'im.

I took a damp cloth and washed him off as best I could. Then, I draped a sheet over him. I didn't want his privates out for anyone to see. I picked him up and carried him out to the workshop. Thankfully, it was still dark so none of the neighbors walkin' by would notice anythin' out of the ordinary.

After settin' him down on the long wooden table, I grabbed one of Pa's skinnin' knives. The first thing I did was slice open his belly just below the ribs. You gotta be careful not to hit the organs 'cause if you puncture 'em, it messes up the whole thing.

I cut around the edges, real slow, pullin' back the skin from the muscles. I remember the smell—faint at first then stronger as I worked. The blood had dried in the places I'd pressed, but there was still a bit of wetness seepin' out like it didn't wanna go.

It wasn't that hard to get the skin off once I made the cut. I worked it around his arms and legs, the meat underneath slippin' away like it wasn't even part of him no more. I'd skinned rabbits before. It didn't feel all that different. The trick is to peel it off in one piece, not too many tears, or else it won't hold right later. After that, I took the bones out slowly, popped the joints, and pulled the marrow out like I

was takin' the last of a stick of butter.

The work was hard. My hands and arms ached somethin' awful. Sweat soaked my thin T-shirt, and the cool night breeze sent a shiver down my spine. I was gonna need a shower after this to be sure.

I didn't have any formal knowledge of how to do it right, just watched Pa did it a few times, so I figured the best way was trial and error. I stuffed his body with what I had—old rags, some straw from the barn, whatever I could find. For the skin, I used salt, lots of salt, rubbing it in thick until the flesh wouldn't rot. I didn't have a needle so I used nails—thin, sharp ones I found in the shed—to stitch him up.

It was a mess. Some of the cuts I made still gaped open despite the nails, but it worked. He was stiffer than before, like a little puppet, but he didn't look *right.* His eyes were too wide, too empty so I took his eyelids and glued 'em shut tighter than they'd ever been.

Once Beau Jr. was done, I carried him back into the house and propped him up against the sofa to sit on the floor, as if he were going to play a game.

Exhausted, I plopped down on the sofa next to him. I had more to do, but I was just too dang tired. I closed my eyes. I'd rest for a bit then get back to it. I had to get it done before the stink got too noticeable.

Believe it or not, those few hours of sleep was what I needed. I woke refreshed and ready to go. It might've been the first time in a long time I actually slept without any noise to jerk me awake. No shouting, no sounds of flesh hitting flesh, no grunts and groans from Beau Jr. in the midst of night terrors. A smile actually grew on my face.

Mary Jo was next.

Ah, Mary Jo. She wasn't as hard as Beau Jr., but I had to be more careful. She was smaller and more delicate. I cut around her neck and joints real careful, like unwrappin' a fragile piece of glass. Her little body still smelled fresh, but it was that sweet smell of death, like something sweet had gone sour too quick.

I stuffed her, too, though I didn't have as much material to work with. The straw made her stiff, her arms too straight, like she was held in place by a spirit stronger than just the bones. I didn't bother with her face much. I left it soft, just let her cheeks fall as they would, but her hair, that was important. Her hair had to look like it was still alive. I combed it, brushed it smooth, and tied it back with a ribbon she used to wear all the time, the one Mama always told her to take off when she was inside.

Her little body wasn't too hard to set up. I propped her up on the couch with Beau Jr., her little arms open, like she was ready to give him a hug. Her hands were stiff, though, and her shoulders didn't

quite slump right. It didn't look natural. It looked wrong. Well, there wasn't much I could do about that. It was what it was.

Then, there was Mama.

I didn't know what to do with her at first. I thought about leavin' her in the kitchen, like she'd be cookin' supper or somethin', but she didn't look right sittin' at the table, slumped over in her chair so I laid her out on the floor in front of the stove, puttin' her hands together like she was prayin'. Her fingers were still soft, too soft. I had to stuff them with the rags from the closet to make 'em hold.

But it wasn't her hands that troubled me. It was her face.

I couldn't leave her eyes wide open like that. They were bulgin', the pupils all black and empty. I took a needle and thread that I found in her sewing basket, which I shoulda looked in first before I started all of this, and stitched her eyelids closed.

But it wasn't good enough. I wanted her to look like she was alive again. I needed to see it so I cut off her lips and stitched 'em into a big, wide smile. Her cheeks were pulled up high, like she was happy, like she had no cares in the world, but the way her lips were sewn on, it didn't look like happiness. It looked like she was smilin' out of spite, like she was sayin' "You can't get rid of me that easy."

I know, Mama. I patted her cheek.

Her body, once I had it put back together, was perfect. She fit right in in front of that stove, her hands holdin' the spoon like she was stirrin' somethin' in the pot.

But the smell, the smell was always there no matter what I did. It never went away, not even after I had her all set up. I could still smell it, that iron, that rotten meat. I couldn't make it go away, but it didn't matter. I had them all in place now.

I sat at the table and looked at my family at work and play. It filled me with a bit of joy.

Then, I thought about what I should do about Pa. Since he'd already been declared missing, it wouldn't make any sense for me to bring him back into the family house. He deserved to stay out under the wood pile and rot, returning to the dirt.

I had to be satisfied with the family I had left. The house was filled again, just like before. It was quiet, real quiet, the way I liked it. No more fightin'. No more yellin'. They were there. They were present, but they weren't *alive*, at least not like before, and I was fine with that.

I lived with them like that for months. It was perfect. It was the way it was always meant to be. I cooked for myself, mostly hotdogs and canned beans, but some days, I boiled a few eggs and had them spread out on toast. The rest of the time I spent as I liked—reading comic books without any interruptions and going out into the woods

without having to get permission. I didn't even bathe. That only lasted a week, though, because my own smell started to bother me. At least Mama wasn't nagging at me about it.

Everything was quiet and peaceful until the day the preacher came by.

CHAPTER EIGHT

BADGER TO JACK

Now, let's make one thing clear, Jack.

I don't hate the preacher for what he did. I plum expected it, I did, but since then, I've got no use for preachers in particular.

They think they know better. Some do. Some, why, they're just as bad as you and me and the others in this place, don't you think?

Yeah, I can see you do. You've met a few preachers in here, haven't ya?

Man, I bet you could tell some stories. Wish I had time to hear them, you know?

CHAPTER NINE

BADGER

I knew it was bound to happen sooner or later. I just didn't think it would be the preacher who found out. He wasn't the nosy type. Mostly kept to himself except on Sundays, but every now and then, he would stop by to check on us, say a prayer or two, and remind Mama to bring the little ones to church.

The first time he came 'round, I told him they'd all gone to Mississippi. He believed me and left, and I figured he'd leave me be.

Turns out, I figured wrong.

It was a Thursday, late afternoon. I was out back diggin' in the garden, finally getting out the carrots, potatoes, and onions before they went bad, when I heard his boots on the front steps.

He knocked once, twice, then called out, "You in there, son?"

I wiped my hands on my jeans and walked around to the front, still holding the spade in my hand. I thought about tellin' him Mama still wasn't home, like I did with everyone else, but he was already pushin' the door open before I could stop him.

"Just wanted to check on y'all," he said, steppin' inside. "Ain't seen your mama in weeks."

I followed him in, my heart thumpin' so hard it felt like it was gonna bust right outta my chest. He stood there in the gloomy living room, lookin' at Mary Jo and Beau Jr..

"Well, would ya look at that," he said, smilin'. "Playin' real nice, ain't they?" He walked closer and leaned down to get a better look. "They always sit this still?"

I didn't say nothin'. Just stood there, watchin' him. I knew my world was gonna get ruined, but I didn't have the gumption to do anything about it. In fact, I was kinda tired. It was hard work taking care of myself and makin' sure the house was in order.

His smile faded as he walked closer. His hand reached out toward Mary Jo's cheek. Then, he pulled back real quick, like he'd touched somethin' hot.

"Son," he said, his voice low and slow. "What… what happened

here?"

I still didn't say nothin'. What was there to say? Not like I could really explain, not in any way he'd understand.

He turned to me, his face pale as a sheet. "Lord have mercy," he whispered. "Are they…"

I nodded. It wasn't like I could lie to the old preacher man, not when he had laid eyes on what I'd done.

His eyes nearly bugged out of his face, especially when they fixed on Mama in the kitchen. The night before last, her body kinda just slumped to the side, and I hadn't gotten around to fixin' her.

He backed away, almost trippin' over the rug, and I almost laughed at the comical way he moved. The preacher made a break for the door, but I grabbed his arm before he could get outside. My other hand tightened on the spade.

"Preacher, you don't gotta tell nobody," I said, my voice calm but firm. "Ain't no need for all that. Everything's fine just the way it is."

"Fine?" he repeated, his eyes wide. "Boy, you done lost your damn mind! You killed your mama and siblings!"

"Had to," I said. "Too much noise. Too many voices. But it's quiet now. Peaceful."

"Where's your father? Is he… somewhere in the house?"

I shook my head. "Nah, he's out back where he belongs. Rotting under the wood pile like a piece of old meat."

That musta really up the fear in him as he yanked his arm free and ran out the front door, his boots hittin' the dirt hard. I watched him go, knowin' it was over. He would go straight to the sheriff, and they would come back with guns and handcuffs and questions I didn't feel like answerin'.

I thought about runnin', but where would I go? The house was the only place I'd ever known. I didn't wanna leave it behind. I didn't want to leave the family behind, not even with all the trouble comin'.

So I sat down on the porch and waited.

It didn't take long. The sheriff showed up with two deputies and the preacher in tow. They didn't ask me much. Just told me to stand up, turn around, and put my hands behind my back. I did what they said. "No muss, no fuss," as my mama would always say.

While they were cuffin' me, one of the deputies peeked inside and came right back out, his face lookin' like he'd just seen a ghost.

"Jesus Christ," he muttered. "They're all… posed, like they're still livin'."

The sheriff nodded. "Take him in," he said, jerkin' his head toward me.

I didn't struggle. Didn't say a word. Just climbed into the back of the car and stared out the window as they drove me away.

The last thing I saw was the preacher standin' on the porch, his face full of sorrow and somethin' else. Fear, maybe.

I wondered if he'd still say a prayer for me after all this. I hoped he would. We were all children of God, weren't we?

CHAPTER TEN

BADGER TO JACK

You're lookin' a bit pale there, Jack? You all right?

I know you've heard so many stories over the years. Known many killers and murderers. I guess I'm one of those too. Although I suspect you ain't heard of something like I'd just done tell you.

I guess it's quite shockin' to hear at first. How could a little kid do such a thing to his family? I don't rightly know even now. It's just somethin' I had to do, I guess. Maybe Pa had been right, and I had the devil in me from birth.

Beats me. Guess no one will ever know. I'll go to my grave a mystery, which is kinda cool, I suppose.

I'll finish up my story for ya, Jack. You look plum worn out. You should go home and rest knowing I'll get what's coming to me. Death and I are old friends. We're well acquainted, and I ain't afraid to meet him face to face.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

BADGER

They took me to the sheriff's office first. Sat me down in a little room with nothin' but a table and two chairs. It smelled like stale coffee and sweat. The sheriff came in after a while, holdin' a notebook and lookin' at me like I was somethin' he'd scraped off his boot.

"Son," he said, sittin' down across from me. His voice was strained. "I, ah, can't even wrap my head around what I just saw in your house." He swallowed. "Can you explain to me what in hell happened?"

I shrugged. "Ain't much to explain."

He leaned forward, foldin' his hands on the table. "Son, we found your mama, your brother, and your sister all sittin' around like they were still alive only they've been dead for months." He wiped a hand over the stubble on his chin. "I… I never seen anything like that. It looked like it was right out of one of them horror movies."

"I put 'em there," I said. "Made 'em look nice."

He blinked, like he wasn't sure he heard me right. "You put 'em there?"

I nodded.

"You sure it wasn't your daddy who did this and you're coverin' for him? Maybe why he ran away? Your daddy's always been a violent man."

In some ways, I hated that he wanted to blame Pa for what happened and give him credit for what I'd worked my butt off to do. Pa had never worked as hard I had a day in his life.

"Nah, Pa's got a nice spot under the wood pile. He never did run away."

The sheriff blinked at me, like he was trying to wake up from a bad dream. "You tellin' me you killed your daddy and buried him under the wood pile in the backyard?"

"Yup. Quieted him down. I quieted 'em all down. It was too noisy in that house. Couldn't think straight."

He stared at me for a long time, like he was tryin' to figure out if I was pullin' his leg. Then, he stood up, opened the door, and called for

the deputies. “Take him to one of the cells,” he said, “and call the coroner. We’re gonna need a full report on this.”

The trial came a few months later. They called it the biggest thing that ever happened in our little town. People packed into the courthouse like it was a damn carnival, whisperin’ and gawkin’ at me like I was some kind of sideshow attraction.

The lawyer they gave me was a young fella from the next county over. Said his name was Mr. Larson. He wore a cheap suit that didn’t fit quite right and kept sweatin’ through his shirt.

“Son,” he said, sittin’ down next to me before the trial started, “I’m gonna do my best to help you, but you gotta work with me, okay? You need to tell the jury you’re sorry for what you did. Show ‘em you’re remorseful.”

“Why?” I asked.

He blinked at me like I’d spoken in tongues. “Because they need to see you regret what happened. It might save your life.”

I shook my head. “I don’t regret it. It was the right thing to do.”

He opened his mouth to say somethin’ then closed it again and just sighed.

Obviously, the trial didn’t last long. Back then, justice was served pretty quick like. The prosecutor laid everything out real plain for the jury—how I killed my family, how I posed ‘em around the house, and how I lived with ‘em for months like nothin’ was wrong. He called it “cold-blooded” and “monstrous.” Said I was the worst kind of killer, the kind that didn’t feel a lick of remorse.

They brought in the coroner, who talked about how long they’d been dead and how well I’d preserved ‘em. They even showed pictures, which made some folks in the courtroom gasp and turn away. One poor woman even passed out right there in her seat. They had to carry her out on a stretcher. I felt bad for her.

Mr. Larson tried to paint me as a confused boy who didn’t know what he was doin’. Said I was troubled, that maybe the abuse at home had pushed me too far. He did his best, but it wasn’t enough.

The jury didn’t take long to decide.

“Guilty,” the foreman said, loud and clear.

The judge stared down at me from his big wooden chair, his face all stern and serious. He announced his sentence and I didn’t flinch. Didn’t cry. Didn’t beg for mercy.

What was the point? I’d done what I did, and I wasn’t sorry for it.

The sheriff led me outta the courtroom, past all the folks who’d come to watch. Some of ‘em looked at me with disgust, others with pity, but none of it mattered. I was headin’ to the only place left for someone like me, somewhere where they lock you up and throw away the key.

Well, you know, ‘cause you’re here just like me. In some ways, I think you’re just as imprisoned as everyone else.

CHAPTER TWELVE

BADGER TO JACK

The first few years in this place, it was like time didn't even matter. You wake up one day, and it's all just the same thing over and over—these white walls, the click-clack of shoes on the floor, the smell of bleach in the air. They don't call it a hospital, but that's what it feels like sometimes. People here don't get better. They just keep takin' their pills and sittin' in their rooms until they go madder than they already are. You'd think I'd feel out of place, but the truth is, I felt right at home.

It was quiet here most days. Not like the house. The house had noise—voices, fights, the sound of my father hittin' my little brother, Mama cryin' in the other room. I was always waitin' for something bad to happen, but here, it was still. Real still.

At first, I had a cell all to myself. Not because I was dangerous, though I guess I was. Although I wouldn't ever hurt anyone else. No one in this place deserved that. It was because they figured I was a danger to myself. They didn't know what to do with me. They would ask questions and write down answers I didn't feel like givin'. They thought I'd snap one day, just like the others, but I never did.

I was content in a way. In my head, it was just like before, when I had lived alone with them. I would sit there in my room, thinkin' and talkin' to them in my head. Sometimes, I'd close my eyes and pretend they were all still sittin' around me, but the place was too quiet for that. The walls, they didn't talk back.

They gave me medication to keep me calm, but I didn't take it right away. I didn't like the way it made me feel—numb and floaty, like I wasn't even real—so I kept my distance. But after a while, I noticed they were right about one thing. If I didn't take those pills, the noise in my head would come back, and when it did, it was louder than anything I'd ever heard. The voices of my family, they'd scream at me. Sometimes it was Pa, yellin' at me for what I did. Other times, it was Mama's sweet voice tellin' me I'd done good, that I'd done the right thing. They never agreed on nothin'. Not even when they were both dead.

In the end, I couldn't keep up with the noise. I started takin' the pills 'cause it made it all go away, even if it was just for a while.

The first time they made me sit with one of those there psychologists, I wasn't sure what to expect. I figured they'd try to fix me, but they couldn't. I'd already made up my mind about what I'd done. Ain't no one could change that.

"You killed your family," Dr. Turner said. You know him, I think. Younger guy, big nose. He was leanin' over his desk with his fingers steepled together. "You killed them all and posed them in your house like some kind of macabre diorama. Do you understand what that means, Pete?"

I nodded. "Yeah."

He raised an eyebrow, like he was lookin' for somethin'. "Do you feel any remorse for what you did?"

Everyone was always askin' that. Everyone always wanted to know if I was sorry.

I thought about it but not for long. "Nah."

His eyes got small, like I'd told him somethin' wrong. "You don't feel any guilt at all?"

I leaned back in my chair, foldin' my arms across my chest. "I didn't do nothin' wrong. I just gave 'em peace. It was loud before. Too loud."

He stared at me for a long time, like he couldn't figure me out, but he didn't try to push it any further after that. He scribbled somethin' in his notebook then nodded. "You're not like the others, Pete," he said. "You've got a… clarity about you. It's disturbing, but it's clear."

I didn't know if he meant that as a compliment, but I figured it didn't matter.

After that, they started puttin' me in group therapy. This was before you got here, Jack. A bunch of other crazy folks sittin' around, talkin' 'bout their problems like they could fix each other. There was a woman who kept screamin' about how her husband was still after her, a man who claimed he could talk to animals, and a fella who thought the TV was givin' him messages from God. None of 'em had anything on me. I just kept quiet, listened to them jabber on, and thought about my family.

Sometimes, I'd hear the others talkin' about what they did, how they killed their families or hurt people. They'd get real worked up, tryin' to justify their actions, but I never felt that need. I knew what I did, and I didn't need to explain it to anyone.

Over time, though, something happened. The voices in my head started to get quieter. At first, it was a relief, but then, it was like something was missin'. I couldn't hear them anymore, not like I used to. I couldn't hear Mama's voice, couldn't hear Pa's gruff laugh, couldn't hear Mary Jo or Beau Jr. arguin' over somethin' stupid. It was just me now.

Just me and the silence.

I think about the house sometimes. I think about what it would be like if they were still there, if I still had Beau Jr. and Mary Jo sittin' on the couch,

if Mama was still cookin' in the kitchen, if Pa was in his workshop cussin' under his breath. I think about the stillness I had then and how it was better than the noise in here.

But sometimes, I hear 'em whispering to me in the back of my mind. They're still here, I think. Maybe they never really left.

And I guess that's the part that bothers me the most. Even after all I did, I still hear them.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

JACK

Badger died a short while after that.

Every time I think about him, all I picture are the sewn eyes of his ma and siblings.

Never once did I hear an inch of regret in his voice. Nothing about him says he was sorry for what he did.

I think a few beers down at the pub are calling my name after this.

PATIENT: CINDY

Deathbed Confessions of the Criminally Insane

Special thanks to Paulina and Tammy Woods and Kristen Peters for helping me to name those in this confession.

CHAPTER ONE

Ready for another joke?

Why did the serial killer become a baker? Because he liked slicing through the competition.

Lame, I know, but tell me you're not picturing someone with a knife and a side of cookies right now?

On that note, that's exactly what I'm eating right now, a plate of oatmeal chocolate chip cookies made just for me. No, I'm not sharing them, not with Ike or anyone else.

They don't deserve them.

Interested in knowing why?

All those fuckers on duty tonight took off for their break just as a patient was brought up, and trust me when I say it was done on purpose.

Have you ever met someone who just gave you the creeps? Like you'd see them and your body would go all funny, like someone's dancing on your grave while sawing through your stomach at the same time?

No? Just me? Got it.

Well, this patient freaks me out. Of all the psychotics I've met, this one is at the top of my "stay away" list.

The problem is, Ike knows this, and I pissed him off the other night over beer. I won't go into why or how, but let's just say I had a few too many, so did he, and we said some things that don't need to be repeated.

I apologized. So did he. I forgave, but apparently, he hasn't.

Don't worry. Payback is a bitch, and I'll get him.

I won't say anything else about this patient. Once you've read her confession, you'll understand.

CHAPTER TWO

I just returned from a meeting with the warden when I find Ike and all the other floor staff standing around the nurses station, silent as hell during the midnight hour.

As soon as I round the corner, they all scatter like crabs in sand, except for Ike.

He stays, his arms crossed over his massive chest, like I'm supposed to be intimidated.

We both know he doesn't scare me.

"You've got a patient."

That's all he says.

"Don't you mean you have a patient?" I head toward my office, casually glancing at the coffee machine and wondering if I want more gut rot or if I'll make it through to the end of this shift.

"I'm on break. So is everyone else. This one, it's all on you."

I stop and pivot, but he's gone. There's a sheet of paper left on the counter, folded in half, with "Open Me" written on the top.

This isn't Alice in Fucking Wonderland, and I'm tempted to ball up the paper and toss it, but I don't.

Ike is still pissed. That's on him. I apologized. I forgave him for being an asshole. If there's one thing I've learned from this job, it's not to hold onto shit because it rots your soul. Ike… Well, as he likes to remind me, I'm not his keeper nor am I his personal fucking secretary, and the only emotions I'm allowed to dictate to him are exactly none.

This one is all you, the note reads. *Now we're even.*

What the actual fuck? I grab the file he left behind, glance at it, groan, and drop the folder like it's a hot sack of horse shit.

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck. Fuckity fuck, fuck, fuck.

I stomp to my office, open the container of cookies, and shove at least two into my mouth, all the while still swearing up a storm.

Because… fuck.

Cindy is exactly the last person I want to see, listen to, and kill. As far as I'm concerned, she can rot in her own personal prison and die a very slow agonizing death. Considering what I read, though, she's not going to know she's dying, and honestly, that's not fair either.

Some people deserve the hell they put themselves in.

Some people deserve all that pain they experience at the end.
Does admitting that make me a monster?
Ask me if I care.

CHAPTER THREE

Let me paint the scene for you.

Cindy—we're calling her that for a reason, one you'll realize soon enough—sits in her bed, her head propped up on a pillow, hands folded in her lap. She's smiling at me. Her hair is a viper's nest covered in gray, and I'm sure I couldn't pay any orderly in here a million dollars to comb through it. I'm surprised no one has shaved it yet.

On second thought, I could keep that imagined million and shave her head myself. That would be satisfying.

When she smiles, her face is folds into deep, craggy wrinkles, and to be honest, all she needs is a black witch's hat, and she'd be the perfect decoration for my porch on Halloween.

Is that too mean?

"Jaaaaaccccckkkk," she says like a sigh, like I'm the best fucking thing she's ever seen.

"Cindy." I stay right where I am, leaning against the door, ready to pivot and disappear from her view at any time.

"I'm the last person you want to see. I know that," she says, staring down at her tied hands.

"Heard you weren't feeling well."

She shrugs. "If I'm up here, guess death is hovering. Maybe you can help with that?"

I roll my eyes. No, I don't fucking want to help with that, thank you very much.

"Is this the part where you read me a bedtime story and then I'm lights out for good?" Her smile is back, and I'm just waiting for a snake to slither through her lips.

"Well, sunshine, if you're wanting help going to sleep, you're the one who needs to be telling me a bedtime story, not the other way around. I'm sure you've heard how this works." I push myself off the wall and stare down at her, my head tilting slightly. "And for you, it had better be the story of a lifetime."

Her eyes sparkle, and inside, I'm silently cursing. Cursing the warden. Cursing Ike. Cursing the dimwats downstairs who decided sending her up here rather than keeping her comfortable downstairs

was a good idea.

Fuck, I'll just curse them all.

Cindy is a woman who grates me, if you can't tell. There's something about her I do not like. Her whole energy pushes me away, like its evil or cancerous. Having to sit in the same room with her makes me as mad as hell.

If it wasn't for the fact the warden had already told me he wanted the confession from my next patient, I wouldn't be standing here.

Why he wants her confession, I haven't got a clue. Everyone knows what she did. They've even made horror films from her story.

Fuck it.

CHAPTER FOUR

CINDY TO JACK

Do you like fairy tales, Jack? The ones that you heard when you were a child? The ones your mother would gently tell you while you snuggled in bed together?

I never fell asleep until Mama came to the end. The endings were always my favorite. The hero prevailed, and the villain got their just desserts.

I loved them all, but one has always been my favorite.

Cinderella.

Her story made me wish for true love and happily ever afters.

It took me a long time to realize her story wasn't real. Sad, right? But once I found that out, I also realized that true love and happily ever afters, well, they were lies too.

Everyone wants to believe in those stories. They want to add their own to the myth, but you and I, we know the truth. There is no such thing as true love, just true for now. And happily ever afters… they, for sure, don't exist. That's just a fact.

I'll tell you my fairy tale story, Jack, but first, do you think we could have a tea party?

CHAPTER FIVE

CINDY

Once upon a time, my world was safe and warm, and that was all because of Mama. She kept it that way.

She was the anchor that held our little family ship steady, even when the storms came. She knew how to make everything right—a warm hug, a gentle smile, or a soft song while she cooked supper. Her voice was so soothing. Sometimes, I can still hear it in my head late at night when I'm alone in the dark.

But then Mama got sick, and no matter how much she smiled or sang, she couldn't chase the sickness away.

I tried though. I thought if I tried hard enough, she'd get better. I didn't want to live life without her in it. When she closed her eyes for the last time, my whole world tilted, and I was thrown overboard.

I'd only been ten then, and I didn't know how to swim.

Papa didn't know how to steer the ship without her. He did his best, in his own way, but it wasn't enough.

He worked long hours at the mill and would come home tired and quiet. My little brother, Cullen, was only six, too young to understand much of anything. I tried to be strong for him, the way Mama would've been, but I was only a child myself.

I didn't know how to sew the holes in our lives back together. I could barely cook a decent meal, although Papa never complained.

Without Mama, the house felt empty. There used to be laughter and music. Now, it was just painful silence. Even Cullen's voice was quiet when he played with his toys.

The house didn't smell like fresh bread or lilacs anymore. It smelled like dust and sadness.

Papa didn't talk much, and when he did, it was only to tell me to look after Cullen or to remind me to do my chores. He stopped looking at me the way he used to, like I was his adorable little girl with the pep and chatter of two squirrels, he would always say. Now, I was just another responsibility, another thing to keep afloat in a sea of bills and work.

He was never mean, though. Never cruel. Just apathetic to what I

was dealing with and how I was feeling. Sometimes, I wondered if he even realized that he might have lost a wife, but I had lost a mother and a role model.

It wasn't all that different with Cullen, except Papa did spend a little bit of extra time with him as he was still just so young.

Papa was just as empty as the house felt without Mama. I never asked, though, if that was what it was like for him. Children didn't ask such things of their parents.

We operated like that for days then weeks then months. I tried to be good, to be diligent with the household chores, and not complain, but some days were so hard that I found I had to go to my room and scream into my pillow to let out the anger and sadness building inside my body.

Papa heard me one night and remarked on it the next morning at breakfast, telling me I needed to grow up if not for myself then for Cullen. Next time, I made sure to stuff the pillow right into my mouth to muffle the anguish.

It was the beginning of my conditioning to keep my true emotions bottled up for the sake of others, making myself compliant and small to keep everyone else happy.

It wasn't long before Rowena came into our lives. Ten months and five days to be exact. Papa met her at church, or so he said. She was a widow. Supposedly, her husband had fallen down a flight of stairs and broke his neck. She was beautiful in a sharp, glittering kind of way, like a shard of broken glass catching the sun.

Papa brought her around for supper one evening, and I could see the way her smile wrapped around him like a thorny vine. She laughed at his jokes, too hard and too quickly, even the bad ones, and she patted Cullen on the head and cooed at him like he was a cute little dog.

She looked at me, too, but not with kindness. Her smile for me was different—thin and tight, like she was measuring me for something she didn't like. She was taking stock of me and had found me lacking.

They courted for no more than a month, but it was obvious to me from day one what Rowena's goal was. She wanted a well to-do husband that she could control.

Papa married her before the summer was over. It was quick, too quick, but Papa said it was for the best. "We need someone to help keep things together," he told me, his voice rough and tired.

I wanted to scream that we didn't need her, that we could figure it out on our own, that we had been doing all right as is. I wanted to tell him that I would do better. I'd do the chores better and faster. I'd learn how to cook proper instead of the hamburger casserole I'd make three times a week because it was the only dish I knew how to do

well. It had been something Mama had put together on special days. It had always reminded me of her every time I made it.

But I didn't speak up. Papa wouldn't have listened anyway. He was already caught in Rowena's sticky web.

At first, Rowena pretended to care about me. She would braid my hair and call me "sweetheart," but her hands were always too tight, pulling and yanking until my scalp stung. She bought me frilly and uncomfortable dresses in pastel colors that I disliked and told me how pretty I looked, but her eyes frosted over when she said it.

Her eyes were cold during so many things, like during family dinners or when Cullen would ramble on about all the things he learned that day. I couldn't understand how Papa didn't see it.

After about a month of her testing the waters at how far she could go before Papa would notice or say anything, she took over everything —what we ate, where we went, even how I played with my toys. It wasn't long before she turned our home into her kingdom. She was the queen, and we were just her subjects.

Papa never saw it that way. He was blinded by her feminine wiles. She was good at manipulating him with a mere soft touch of her hand on his arm. Her smile would widen, her red lips curling upward to show off her crooked teeth. Two of the front ones were stained yellow from the cigarettes I knew she smoked in secret behind the garage. Her smile was almost macabre.

Later, that look would serve as part of the décor for my elaborate stage play.

CHAPTER SIX

CINDY TO JACK

I heard the crime scene photos from my house were leaked to the public a few years after my incarceration. They became some kind of novelty, passed around to those with a morbid curiosity. That's strange, don't you think? I mean, what kind of person would find those photos interesting? A weirdo, if you ask me.

One of those weirdos wrote to me once. Do you remember? I think I asked you for advice on whether to write back to them. You told me to tell them to go right to hell, and that's what I did, Jack. You always know just what to do. That's why I've always liked you.

JACK HERE: For the record, I told her to go right to hell.

CHAPTER SEVEN

CINDY

It wasn't long before Rowena paraded me around like a doll, especially at church. She would dress me up in layers of lace and ribbons, her face beaming like I was some prize she'd won. She called me her "little doll" and told everyone how much I loved her and how lucky I was to have a stepmother like her. The other ladies at church would nod and smile, their eyes darting to me like they were trying to figure out if it was true.

I wanted to tell them it wasn't. I wanted to rip those dresses to shreds right in the middle of the sermon and scream that I wasn't a doll, but Rowena had a way of making you feel small, like you were nothing without her.

She once told me I should have been thankful for her attention since I was motherless and alone. I didn't need her attention, but I didn't say that. I didn't want to be a disappointing daughter to Papa. He seemed like he really needed her.

Since her arrival, he even started to smile a little more. I hated that this woman made him even remotely happy. It almost felt like a betrayal to Mama's memory because she had been the finest of women. Everyone had said as much at her funeral and every time I'd see someone at a shop or at school. That all stopped, though, when Rowena showed up. Now, neighbors didn't talk about Mama at all.

Rowena's punishments started small, like taps on the wrist for not sitting still at the dinner table or scolding me for spilling milk when I poured it onto my cereal. Over a few months, they grew meaner and sharper. If I didn't smile the right way at church, she'd pinch my arm hard enough to leave bruises. If I dirtied one of her precious dresses, she'd make me scrub it until my fingers bled from the effort and the bleach. Once, when I forgot to thank her for a meal, she locked me in the pantry for hours, saying, "Maybe a little hunger will teach you some gratitude."

Little did she know that after the second time, I'd snuck in a tin of cookies, hiding it behind the jars of preserves. I think she must've caught on eventually because after the sixth time, she stopped locking

me inside the pantry, choosing to shut me in the dark and dusty broom closet instead.

She didn't just hurt me with her hands, though. Her words cut deeper than any slap ever could. She called me stupid, clumsy, or ungrateful, and those were the nicest ones. She'd compare me to Mama and find us both lacking "Your mother would be ashamed of you," she told me once. "You're so lazy it's no wonder your father needed someone else to step in," she said another time.

I stopped looking in mirrors because I couldn't stand to see the girl she saw—a failure, a burden, a useless little doll. I even went as far as removing the one in my room in case I caught my reflection and cringed from embarrassment for being so inadequate. Some nights, I'd lay in bed and think, *No wonder Mama left me*.

Rationally, I knew that she died because she got sick, but I was still a child. No one is rational at twelve.

Cullen didn't get the same treatment. Rowena cooed over him, giving him sweets and patting his cheek. She didn't love him, not really, but he was too young to notice.

I noticed it, though. I noticed more than she thought I did. She would sometimes heavily sigh through her nose if Cullen prattled on too long or if he wanted her to hug him. His desire for that touch didn't last all that long. I think, in his own way, my little brother knew Rowena didn't really want to play mother to his child.

Papa didn't see the reality of her behavior either. He was always working, always tired, so he wasn't really home all that much, and when he was, he spent his time drinking his beer and watching TV or in his study smoking cigars and reading. Anything to be left alone. When I tried to tell him about Rowena, he'd sigh and say, "She's doing her best, Cindy. We all are."

I wanted to shout at him that he had stopped doing his best the moment he had brought her home. I didn't, though, because I could still see the emptiness in his eyes, a void that Mama had once filled.

After months of enduring her, I started to hate Rowena with a fire that scared me. I hated her sharp voice, her cold eyes, and her perfect, painted smile. I hated the way she twisted everything good in my life and made it hers. But more than anything, I hated how she made me feel—small, broken, and helpless. I wanted to fight back, but how do you fight someone who holds all the power? I was twelve going on thirteen. What could I possibly do that would make a difference?

So I did what Rowena wanted. I wore the dresses despite the scratchiness, smiled for the church ladies despite the embarrassment, and played my part as her perfect little doll, but inside, something was breaking.

Each time she pinched me, each time she called me stupid or

locked me in the pantry, I felt a crack run through me. One day, I knew those cracks were going to split me wide open, and I feared what might come spewing out.

Looking back now, I think Rowena thought she had won. She thought she'd molded me into what she wanted—her pretty, obedient little doll—but she didn't see the fire smoldering under the surface, waiting for the moment to burn everything down.

I don't know when the fire started, only that it crept in slowly like a draft under the door, sneaking in without warning. At first, it was just a spark, a flicker of anger when Rowena scolded me for something small, like a threadbare hem on my dress or the smudge of dirt on my cheek.

Her words stung like nettles, sharp and mean, wrapping around me in mutterings meant to cut. "What kind of girl lets herself look like this?" she'd hiss, her fingers pinching my chin as she forced me to look in the mirror that she had put back in my room, as if she knew what torment it brought me.

I'd stare at the reflection, hollow-eyed and pale, my lips pressed tight to keep from crying. I never wanted her to see my tears. It was the one thing that I held onto like a shield. If she couldn't see me cry, then maybe she hadn't really won.

The spark grew when Papa turned away, tired and useless, mumbling something about being busy or not wanting to take sides. He never looked at me long, like he couldn't bear to see what I'd become. I hated that the most. Maybe he didn't want to see the bruises Rowena left when she grabbed my arm too hard or the red marks from the brush she raked through my hair until my scalp burned.

When I asked him for help, he'd sigh, his eyes heavy, his guilt clearly not bad enough to make him act. He'd pat my shoulder and say, "Mind Rowena, Cindy. She's just tryin' to make you a proper young lady."

But sparks have a way of catching, don't they? Every time my brother Cullen laughed no matter how innocently along with Rowena's taunts, every little slight, and every cold glance added kindling to the fire. It wasn't just a flicker anymore. It was a slow, steady burn.

Like the time Rowena made me stand at the front of the church in that awful dress she sewed for me, the one with the frills that scratched my skin raw and the ribbon so tight it left a welt around my neck.

"Smile, Cindy," she whispered through gritted teeth as she pushed me forward. "You look like a little angelic doll."

But I didn't feel like an angel. I felt like a puppet, all the strings pulling, tugging, and yanking at my limbs and at my skin so hard I

thought for sure it would just peel off one day. I had no will of my own while she paraded me around for her amusement.

The fire smoldered deeper the day she slapped me across the face because I dropped her favorite teacup. It wasn't just the sting of her hand that hurt. It was the way she sneered at me afterward, her lips curling as if I were something dirty she couldn't stand to touch.

"Your mama didn't teach you a lick of grace, did she?" she spat.

That was the moment the fire flared brightest. She blamed Mama for my faults as if Mama hadn't done everything she could to hold our family together before the sickness took her. As if she hadn't been the sweetest, most caring person to ever exist.

And then there were the nights, the long, endless nights when I'd lie awake in the dark, my chest tight with the weight of it all pressing down on me like a pile of bricks. The fire inside me burned hotter on those nights, feeding on the anger and the shame, twisting and curling like smoke in my lungs.

I'd clench my fists so hard my nails left little crescent moons in my palms, and I'd imagine what it would be like to be free of her, to silence her sharp tongue and cold eyes finally. On those nights, I imagined those same nails digging into her flesh, making bloody divots. When I envisioned it vividly in my mind, a rush of heat would flush my entire body, and I floated on the elation.

The fire didn't roar to life all at once. For almost a year, it waited, biding its time and feeding on every cruel word, every dismissive shrug, every time Papa and Cullen pretended not to see what was happening right in front of them. As it grew, so did the whispers in my own mind telling me that one day, it would all come to a head.

One day, the fire wouldn't stay hidden anymore. It would consume everything in its path, and I'd be the one holding the match and dancing with the flames.

CHAPTER EIGHT

CINDY TO JACK

I'm curious to know, Jack, have there been any recent letters from Cullen?

The last one I'd received was over six months ago. He told me about the birth of his granddaughter, my grandniece. He's so proud, although I can't imagine what's so amazing about giving birth? I mean, the entire animal kingdom does it. What's he so proud of? His son laying with his wife during her fertile cycle? Any idiot can do that.

I don't mean to sound so bitter. I love my brother. I surely do.

I mean, I did what I did for him too.

Not that he'd ever thank me for it. He had no idea what Rowena had been really like. The evil stepmother just like in the fairy tales. Boys never get it. I mean, besides Hansel, what other boy ever had a hard time in a storybook?

CHAPTER NINE

CINDY

During that entire year, Papa never saw Rowena's true nature. Cullen didn't either. They were too busy playing house with Rowena, pretending everything was fine, pretending we were still a loving and devoted family.

Papa worked late most nights, and when he was home, he buried himself in the paper or sat outside smoking his pipe, staring at the stars like they had the answers. Cullen trailed after Rowena like a puppy, too young to see her for what she was. I felt like a ghost, moving through the house unseen and unheard to avoid Rowena's painful attention. My anger grew with every passing day.

Rowena was careful around Papa. She saved her sharpest words and cruelest punishments for when he wasn't there. Even when he was, though, he didn't seem to notice. He was too busy with his hobbies that he enjoyed, which I thought were just an excuse to isolate himself away from the family.

If he caught a glimpse of the bruises on my arms or the way I flinched when Rowena's hand brushed mine, he didn't say anything. Maybe he didn't want to see it. Maybe it was easier for him to believe Rowena's lies—that I was difficult, that I was acting out, that I needed "a firm hand."

She even went so far as to blame Mama for coddling me and not disciplining me properly. When she said these things, it took all I had not to let fire rage through me and outward toward her.

I resented Papa for his indifference, and I hated him for being so weak and letting her take over our lives, but I hated Cullen more. He was too little to understand, too innocent to see the truth. Rowena lavished him with affection, gave him sweets and kisses, and called him her "little prince." He loved her in the way only a child can, blindly and completely. He didn't see the way she twisted everything good, the way she turned our home into her kingdom and us into her servants.

Well, to be honest, I was the only servant in the household.

The fire inside me burned hottest when I thought about Cullen.

Not because I didn't love him—I did fiercely—but because he didn't suffer the way I did. He didn't have to wear the dresses that scratched and pinched. He didn't have to endure Rowena's sharp words or her cruel punishments. He got to be the golden boy, the beloved child, while I was the broken doll she dragged around by the scruff of the neck to show off to the church ladies to prove she had made a home and had a daughter who adored her.

I accepted all of this as my fate, just like the damsels in distress in the fairy tales, until I heard a voice telling me differently.

It started as a whisper, soft and sweet, like the voice of a little girl. At first, I thought it was just my imagination, a trick my mind was playing on me to cope with the fire burning inside, but the voice was too clear, too deliberate. It called my name softly at first then louder and more insistently.

Cindy, it would say with the insistence of a child tugging on my sleeve for attention. *Why do you let her treat you this way? Why don't you fight back?*

I tried to ignore it, but it was always there, whispering in the back of my mind. It sounded like one of those dolls Rowena loved so much, the kind that blinked and smiled and said things like, "Will you play with me?" But this doll didn't really want to play. It wanted to push, to prod, to fan the flames of my anger until they consumed me.

She doesn't love you, the voice said to me one night as I lay in bed, staring at the ceiling, the sting of Rowena's pinches on the back of my arm still throbbing. *She never will. You're just her doll, something to dress up and show off. She doesn't care about you*.

I squeezed my eyes shut, trying to block it out, but the voice only grew louder. *Why do you let her win? Why do you let her hurt you?*

Because I'm weak, I answered the voice inside my head. *Because I don't deserve to be treated kindly. I'm a horrible, messy, rude girl*. My voice started to sound like Rowena's.

The voice was right. Of course it was. Rowena didn't love me, and she never would no matter what I did or didn't do. No matter how well behaved I was or how I didn't complain when she bullied me. She didn't see me as a person, only as a thing to control, a prop in the perfect life she wanted to build.

The voice then started to whisper the things I couldn't say out loud, the thoughts I was too afraid to think.

She's evil, Cindy. Wicked. You know that, don't you?

"Oh, yes, I know," I'd tell myself, speaking aloud in the dark, my voice trembling.

She deserves to be punished.

I know. I know. I know. It became a mantra as I lay in bed, staring into the dark, feeling something blooming inside.

It was the fire flaring up inside me, hot and bright, but I didn't know what to do with it. I wanted to hurt Rowena the way she hurt me, to make her feel small and helpless and broken, but I didn't know how. I was just a child, on the cusp of being a teenager, and she was the queen of our little kingdom. How could I possibly prevail?

The voice laughed, a high, tinkling sound like a music box winding down. *You'll see*, it said, soothing the raging anger inside for now. *When the time is right, you'll know what to do*.

The next morning, Rowena suddenly slapped me across the face for burning the toast. My cheek stung, the skin warming from the blow, but it was nothing compared to the anger burning inside me. I wanted to scream at her, to shove her away, but I didn't. I bit my tongue and kept my head down, just like always.

The fire inside me grew hotter. I felt like I was going to explode, just like one of those ticking time bombs you see in old crime movies. For a moment, I wondered if I tore open my shirt, would I see a clock face embedded in my chest, the little arms jerking backward, counting down? Ten, nine, eight, seven…

I was anxious about reaching one.

Throughout the days, the voice was my only friend, the only one who understood what I was feeling. It reminded me of the little mice in Cinderella. It whispered to me in the quiet moments, when I was alone in my room or walking through the woods behind our house.

It told me I was strong, stronger than Rowena, stronger than Papa or Cullen. It told me I didn't have to be a doll anymore, that I could break free of the constraints of the pretty dresses, hair curls, and pink lipstick that Rowena put on me with painstaking detail before presenting me to the congregation.

But it also scared me. The things it said, the ideas it planted in my mind, they were dark, dangerous. Despite knowing it was my own voice telling me these things, I started to question its origin. Did I already have this darkness inside me? Or had Rowena created it inside me with her cruel hands and words?

One night, I sat on the floor of my room, staring at the large dollhouse I used to play with. It had been a gift from Mama. Still feeling the sting of Rowena's latest string of bullying words, I said to myself that I wasn't quite ready to fight back. I needed to bide my time, consider the possibilities, and build up the rage and courage to do what I needed to.

When the time comes, you'll know what to do, Cindy.

I didn't know if I wanted to listen to this particular voice of mine. I didn't know if I could, but the fire inside me was too big to ignore and too wild to control. It was only a matter of time before it consumed me completely.

In the end, I knew it would be a fight between my survival and Rowena's.

CHAPTER TEN

CINDY TO JACK

I hope you know that I'm not trying to justify what I did. I had my reasons, but I knew what I did was wrong. Even then, after being pushed to my breaking point, I understood right from wrong. Virtue from sin.

I often asked myself over the years, locked up in here, whether I would do it all over again.

JACK HERE: Cindy gets this almost dreamy look on her face. I'm not sure what she's seeing in that mind of hers, but after a few more moments, she turns back to me and smiles. I have a feeling that her answer to that question would be a resounding yes.

Plus, notice how she says she understands right from wrong, virtue from sin, but doesn't admit she was wrong?

CHAPTER ELEVEN

CINDY

My breaking point didn't end in an explosion like I thought it would. It was way more subdued and understated. Way more lethal and insidious too.

The day started like any other, quiet and tense. The house always felt like it was holding its breath, waiting for Rowena to find something to be upset about.

I set the table for tea for the two of us, a weekly ritual *just for us girls*, arranging everything just so. Papa and Cullen were out of the house. Fishing, I think. When Papa went on his fishing trips, he was gone for days at a time. I was always jealous when he'd take Cullen and not me.

Rowena liked precision, and I had learned her ways. The cups had to sit perfectly in their saucers, with the handles pointing out to the right, the sugar bowl at a slight angle, and the teapot turned just enough so that the handle faced her right hand.

I placed a small vase of flowers in the center—wildflowers from the field behind the house. Rowena liked flowers but only if they were arranged neatly, so I arranged them with an eye for every small detail. Every flower had to have an even number of petals. If one had five, I would pluck one out so it was four. The leaves had to be flat and perfect, not curled in on themselves. If it did, I would cut it off. These things offended Rowena.

I caught myself smoothing the pretty white tablecloth one last time and realized, with a jolt, that I was copying her. Rowena's obsession with control, her need to make everything look perfect… I'd taken it on without even realizing it.

I froze, staring at the careful place settings and the vase of flowers, hating myself for mimicking her. The self-loathing was a new emotion. It felt heavy in my body and in my heart.

But when I stepped back to examine my work, I felt a flicker of satisfaction. It *was* perfect. Nothing was out of place. If Rowena wanted perfection, I would give it to her. Maybe, just maybe, this time she wouldn't find fault with me.

Rowena swept into the room moments later, her presence heavy and commanding as always. She wore her favorite green dress, the one that matched her eyes, and her hair was pinned up in tight curls. She looked like she belonged in one of the magazines she kept stacked on her vanity, a vision of grace and elegance that I knew she took painstaking measures to embody.

She smiled at the table, a brief, shallow curve of her lips, and I thought I had succeeded in finally winning her over.

We sat down for tea. Rowena poured herself a cup. Her movements were fluid and practiced. She didn't speak right away, just stirred her tea—clockwise, always clockwise—and sipped, her eyes scanning the room as if searching for something to criticize.

I tried to relax and enjoy the moment of calm, but I couldn't. My hands trembled as I lifted my cup to my lips. The voice in my head was quiet, but I could feel it watching and waiting. In some way, I thought it wanted Rowena to do or say something to provoke it. To provoke *me*.

At this point, I was anxiously waiting for the chance to retaliate against her for every pinch, slap, harsh word, every slight to my character.

Her body stiffened slightly. It was almost indiscernible, but I spotted it. I felt it across the table. "Cindy," Rowena said in her nasally voice, her tone sharp enough to make me flinch. "You've forgotten the lemon. Again."

I murmured an apology, my voice barely audible above the slight clicking of her manicured nails on the side of her teacup. I started to rise, my legs noticeably trembling, but she waved me off.

"Never mind," she said with a sigh. "It's not as if anyone else will notice. Your manners, however…" She trailed off, shaking her head. "It's no wonder. Your mother never bothered to teach you properly. She was too soft, too indulgent. That's why you're such a disappointment."

The words hit me like a slap. She always brought up my mother, twisting her memory into something ugly.

My hands tightened around the cup in my lap, the fire inside me flaring to life. I told myself to stay calm, to let it pass, but my inner voice was there again, whispering. It was a flutter in my ears, a buzz behind my eyes.

She doesn't deserve your silence, Cindy. She doesn't deserve your obedience.

I clenched my teeth, trying to push the voice away, but it wouldn't stop. I realized then it wouldn't ever stop until I did something about my situation.

She's wicked. You know she is. She's the reason everything is wrong.

Like a rusty knife sawing through wood, Rowena's voice cut through my thoughts. "Honestly, Cindy, if your mother had spent half as much time teaching you discipline as she did coddling you, perhaps you wouldn't be such a burden."

The cup slipped from my hands, shattering against the floor. The pieces of prettily painted porcelain hit the side of my foot.

Rowena gasped, rising to her feet. "What is wrong with you? Do you know how much that set cost? You're hopeless."

Her words didn't have the same effect as they would've mere minutes ago.

Something inside me snapped. I could actually feel the sudden give in my body. The fire roared to life, consuming every thought, every feeling. I didn't think about what to do, what to say. I just moved. My limbs acted on their own. The strings in this puppet play had been severed.

The teapot was still full, the tea steaming hot. I grabbed it and flung its contents at her. The scalding liquid hit her face, and she screamed. The screech vibrated through my body. It was so pleasant to hear as I watched her clutch at her burning skin. She stumbled back, knocking over her chair, her shrieks echoing in the small room.

I didn't stop to think about what I was going to do next. I was on autopilot. My hands sought the satin ribbons hanging from my apron. After a good pull, they came loose, and I lunged at Rowena. She was on the floor, writhing in pain, still clutching her face, when I looped the ribbons around her neck and pulled. Hard.

At first, it felt like it might not work. Maybe the ribbons would break or fray into thin threads. And Rowena was strong. She was a fully grown woman with wide hips and full breasts, and I was still in my waifish teenage stage. It didn't feel like a fair fight. Her body thrashed beneath me as she fought to free herself. Her nails clawed at my hands, raking deep scratches into my skin. Blood pooled to the surface. Surely those would scar.

But the fire inside me gave me strength, more strength than was humanly possible, and I held on, pulling tighter and tighter. The ribbons cut into my fingers. My fingertips went white, losing blood circulation, but still I pulled, unable to stop even if I had wanted to.

I'd gone beyond the pale. There were no take backs. There were no do overs. I was firmly in the present, committing an act of savagery against my tormentor, and I was okay with that.

Her struggles grew weaker, her movements slower. I could feel her heartbeat against my hands, thudding wildly at first then slowing, faltering.

When she finally went still, I let go. My arms were trembling, my breath coming in short, ragged gasps. I stared down at her, at the

lifeless body sprawled on the floor, the ribbons still tied tightly around her neck, the threads imbedded in her flesh from the pressure.

Then, the voice softly hummed a soothing, sweet lullaby inside my head, and I let it out, my voice filling the small space with music.

I felt calm, almost peaceful, as if the fire inside me had burned itself out, not even leaving any ash to clean up.

CHAPTER TWELVE

I smoothed Rowena's hair, tucking a stray curl back into place. She looked so different now, so small, so powerless.

She looked kind now.

The tea set was ruined. When she'd been thrashing on the floor, her foot had connected with the table, and another cup and saucer had dropped to the floor and broke. The tablecloth was stained with blood and tea, but none of that mattered. I knew what I needed to do next.

Rowena had always wanted everything to be perfect, and I would make sure her final moments reflected that.

I didn't need the whispering voice to guide me. I knew what I had to do. I cleaned up and set the table again with a new tablecloth and new cups and saucers. I made another pot of tea and placed the steaming pot on the coaster just as Rowena had taught me.

The next part would be difficult, but I pushed past the physicality and made sure to arrange everything, including Rowena, just so. I worked quickly, my hands steady, my mind clear.

When I was finished, I stepped back to admire my work. Rowena sat at the head of the table, her hair neatly arranged, her hands folded in her lap. The satin ribbons were gone, replaced by the pearls she loved so much. Her head lolled to the side, but that couldn't be helped. It wasn't like I was going to tie her head up to the chair. That wouldn't be proper.

As I continued to make sure everything was in place, I hummed a pretty tune, its melody soft and sweet. It had been something Mama had sung to me.

I smiled, feeling a strange sense of satisfaction. The house was quiet now, the tension gone. A huge weight lifted from my chest and shoulders, and I breathed easily. For the first time in a long time, I felt like everything was exactly as it should be.

Honestly, Rowena would've been proud of how I'd handled it all.

I wiped Rowena's lips with a cloth, careful to remove the smudge of tea that had dribbled down her chin but not to smudge her lipstick.

"You have to look your best," I murmured to her, tilting her head slightly to catch the light.

Her eyes stared blankly, half-lidded, but in my mind, they were bright and kind. She looked so much better this way, her face pale and serene. The red marks were hidden beneath the collar of her dress. She would be happy to know that she still looked like the women in her magazines.

“There we go,” I said sweetly to her, stepping back to admire her. She was perfect now, more perfect than she had ever been in life. “Now, Rowena, I hope you’ll mind your manners today. No fussing and no complaining. It’s a special occasion after all.”

The tea table was set to perfection. I had laid out the finest lace cloth I could find in Rowena’s cupboard, smoothing every crease until it was flawless. The rest of the porcelain tea set gleamed, freshly cleaned, each cup and saucer placed with mathematical precision. Rowena’s seat was at the head of the table, of course. She always insisted on being the center of attention.

Around the table, I arranged our other guests. There was Eleanor, the porcelain doll with the pink dress and curls, and Beatrice, the rag doll I’d had since I was small. She was a bit raggedy from years of loving play, but I thought that was her charm. Rowena hadn’t understood that. If she had, well, then, maybe she wouldn’t be so sad looking sitting at the table.

Beside them sat a collection of smaller dolls, their faces painted into permanent smiles, spots of red on their cheeks to make them look innocent and sweet. I made sure they all looked up at Rowena expectantly, as if waiting for her to say something clever or kind.

Secretly, I knew that would never happen, but I didn’t want to disappoint our guests.

“She’s much quieter now, isn’t she?” I whispered to Beatrice, hoping Rowen didn’t hear as I sat the doll up straighter in her chair.

Beatrice didn’t answer, of course.

I nodded as if she had. “I know. I’m as relieved as you are. No more scolding. No more rules.”

I poured tea for each of my party guests, starting with the guest of honor.

“Rowena, one lump or two?” I asked, holding up the sugar tongs. “Let’s just have one for today. We wouldn’t want you to ruin your figure.”

I giggled at my own silly little joke, imagining the way Rowena would have rolled her eyes at such a comment, but this Rowena didn’t argue. She sat there, prim and proper, her hands folded neatly in her lap. She was such a good guest. The perfect guest. I was quite proud of her that day.

The tea party began in earnest. I chatted with my guests, asking them about their day, their families, and their hobbies, staying away

from rude topics like work and church. Rowena was the star of the show, of course, and I made sure to include her in every conversation. This was the proper polite thing to do. I knew she'd be proud that I had taken all her lessons to heart.

"You know," I said, leaning in conspiratorially to the others, "Rowena hasn't scolded me once today. Isn't that lovely? She's so much more pleasant this way."

The dolls agreed with silent smiles, and I felt a warmth spread through me. For the first time in years, I didn't feel nervous or small. I felt… happy.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The days passed in a blur of tea parties and conversations. I lost myself in the world I had created, a world where Rowena wasn't cruel, where she didn't belittle or punish me. She was kind now, kind and patient, and I found myself liking her for the first time. I was sad it had taken us this long to get along.

I couldn't wait to tell Papa about our breakthrough. I was sure he would be so delighted and finally settled with our family.

At night, after helping her across the first floor of the house, I tucked her into bed, smoothing the covers over her still body. "Goodnight, Rowena," I whispered, brushing a strand of hair from her pale peaceful face. "Sleep well. We have another big day tomorrow."

The voice in my head was quieter now, almost content. It hummed lullabies as I drifted off to sleep, tired yet happy, promising me that everything was as it should be.

The next morning, I decided to host a garden party. I dragged Rowena out to the backyard. She was a lot heavier than she looked, a fact I wouldn't tell her, as I didn't want to hurt her feelings.

It took me a long time to get her out there.

I arranged her in a wicker chair beneath the old oak tree. I brought out the dolls one by one, setting them up around a small table I'd also dragged outside. Surprisingly, the table hadn't been as hefty as Rowena had been. It was a secret I kept to myself. The tea set was replaced with a picnic basket, and I laid out tiny sandwiches and pastries I'd made from scraps in the kitchen.

Rowena had always wanted me to learn how to cook and bake, telling me it was the proper thing for a young woman to learn. I had to be ready to be a loving homemaker when I married, she always told me.

Rowena looked beautiful in the sunlight that afternoon. Her skin seemed to glow, her pearls catching the light.

I adjusted her hat, tilting it just so to keep the sun from her sensitive eyes, and smiled. "You're the belle of the ball," I told her. "Everyone thinks so."

The dolls seemed to agree, their painted eyes fixed on her with admiration. I imagined them clapping and cheering, praising Rowena

for her beauty and grace. She would be so pleased to hear their adoration of her. It was something I knew she secretly coveted. She would never come out and say so, but I knew.

"You've always been so elegant," I said, sitting down beside her. "I think I understand now why you wanted everything to be perfect. It's nice, isn't it? When everything looks just right."

For a moment, I felt a pang of guilt. Rowena had always wanted me to behave, to be a proper lady. Had I been too hard on her? Maybe she wasn't so bad after all. It could've been like this between us if I had worked harder for her affection. As I kept smiling at her, tears welled in my eyes, and they silently rolled down my cheeks. Droplets splattered the front of my pretty dress.

But then I remembered the way she used to grab my arm when I didn't sit straight at church, her nails digging into my skin, leaving half-circle grooves in my flesh. Once she had even broken skin, and I had to wash the wound and put antiseptic ointment so it wouldn't get infected.

I remembered the way she'd sneer at my mistakes, comparing me to my mother in that cold, cutting tone. Her looks were always filled with malice and disgust, making me feel like I was a dirty, nasty little monster that needed to be trained and locked up.

No! She had deserved it.

The voice in my head agreed. *She was cruel. She made you suffer. This is better.*

I nodded, feeling the fire flicker inside me again. Yes, this was better. Rowena was perfect now, and she would stay that way forever.

The tea parties continued morning, noon and night, each one more elaborate than the last. I moved the tea parties to the sitting room, though. It was getting too hard to move Rowena all the time so I had her sitting in a chair.

I kept her dressed in her finest clothes, brushing her hair until it gleamed. A few extra strands came out, but I pretended not to notice, and most definitely didn't tell her. I painted her lips a soft pink, matching the blush I dusted onto her cheeks. She'd become so pale as of late and had lost a lot of her usual color.

She was my doll now, my favorite doll, and for the first time in my life, I felt in control.

I told myself not to worry. Everything was perfect now. "I should keep playing," I assured myself. My whispers, soft and soothing, were like a lullaby that wrapped around my thoughts and cradled them.

Rowena was happy this way. I had made her better. She was everything I'd want in a stepmother now.

Still, as the hours passed, I couldn't help but think about what would happen when Papa and Cullen came home. They were due back

soon, and I knew they would smell of fish and salt, their laughter filling the house like it always did after those trips. They'd come into the kitchen, expecting Rowena to have a hot meal ready. They'd call for me, expecting the usual sulking or muttered responses that I would be punished for, and they would pretend not to see.

I thought maybe I could hide her. I looked at Rowena sitting at the table, the tea service laid out perfectly. I could take her away, hide her in the attic, or bury her in the woods.

As soon as the thought came, the voice hissed. *Why would you do that? You've done nothing wrong. Look at her. She's beautiful. Perfect*.

I tilted my head, considering. "You're right," I said out loud, almost startling myself from the sudden noise.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Rowena was perfect now. Papa and Cullen might even like her better this way. Maybe they'd be impressed with how pretty and polite she was, how still and quiet. They'd never seen her like this before, so serene, so composed.

When I heard the truck pull into the driveway, my heart beat faster. I wasn't scared, not exactly. Just excited. The kind of excitement you feel before a big surprise when you can't wait to see someone's face light up. Like anticipating someone opening the Christmas present you got for them knowing it was their heart's desire.

I didn't go to greet them. I stayed in the sitting room, standing behind Rowena's chair, brushing her hair, my back toward the door. She liked to look her best for guests after all. I hummed a song as I worked, something sweet and lilting, and I swore Rowena was humming along with me.

"Cindy!" Papa's voice boomed from downstairs. I heard the heavy clomp of his boots and the sound of Cullen laughing at something. "Rowena? Where is everybody?"

The house was silent except for their voices and the sound of my brush moving through Rowena's hair. The air felt thick and heavy, like it was waiting for something to happen.

Footsteps echoed throughout the house, slow and deliberate. They stopped outside the door. Papa called my name again, his voice softer now, uncertain.

I didn't answer. I just kept brushing Rowena's hair, humming my melodic tune.

The door creaked open, and he stepped step inside. For a moment, he said nothing. I felt his eyes on me, on Rowena whose back was to the door, and on the tea table.

"Well," he said finally, his voice tinged with surprise, "this is… nice. You girls getting along now?"

I didn't respond. I didn't even look at him. Deep down, I was still angry with him for not seeing the reality of the woman he had married.

"I'm glad to see it," he continued, taking a step closer. "Rowena,

you've been so hard on her. I've been meaning to talk to you about that."

"Too late!" I wanted to shout at him.

He sounded almost relieved, as if he thought everything was fine now. He believed the scene before him, and now, he wouldn't have to step in. He had been too cowardly to do so for the past two years.

But then he moved closer. He stepped around the tea table, his boots scuffing against the floor, and leaned down to place a hand on Rowena's shoulder.

"What the…" he started, his voice faltering.

He had to know. He'd been oblivious to my problems for so long, but surely, he could feel the heaviness in the room. Honestly, the smell had started to fill the space, and it wasn't pleasant.

The moment he touched her, I saw the change in his face. His expression crumpled, his eyes widening, his mouth falling open in a silent scream.

Rowena slumped over sideways. I should've tied her to the chair. That would've been the smarter thing to do.

Papa stumbled back, his hand flying to his chest as if he could stop his heart from breaking.

"Rowena!" His voice cracked.

His knees hit the floor, and for a moment, he just stared at the macabre scene before him, his breath coming in ragged gasps.

Cullen appeared in the doorway, his face twisting with confusion. "What's going on?" he asked, stepping into the room. His eyes went to Papa and then to Rowena slumped unnaturally on the floor. "Papa?"

Papa seemed frozen, his eyes locked on his wife, or the pearls around her neck, or maybe the doll-like makeup on her face. Did he see the red rivets in the flesh of her throat underneath the necklace? Was he starting to understand?

Cullen followed his gaze, his brow furrowing. He started to speak, but his voice trailed off as his mind clearly tried to make sense of what he was seeing. I tamped down the urge to grab him and shove his little face into Rowena's so he could really *see*.

But he wasn't a little child anymore. He was nine going on ten, and I knew he'd started to understand the situation in the house.

When he finally understood, probably from the fact that Rowena's eyes were now clouded over and stared out into nothing, he let out a strangled sound, something between a cry and a choke, and staggered back against the wall.

"Cindy," Papa whispered, his voice trembling with an almost reverent tone. "What… what have you done?"

I looked at him then, finally meeting his eyes. He was so small, so broken. It was almost funny to see him like that, the strong,

unshakable man brought to his knees.

"Something you should've done years ago," I wanted to shout at him.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

“She’s so pretty. Don’t you think so? We’ve been having such a wonderful time together,” I said instead, softly, with a small, whimsical smile on my face.

Cullen stared at me like he didn’t recognize me, like I was a stranger in my own skin. His hands were shaking, his face pale. Was it wrong that I wanted to reach for his hand and snap back his fingers one by one?

Papa tried to speak again, but his words came out in a broken jumble. He looked back at Rowena then at me, as if trying to piece together a puzzle that didn’t make sense. I imagined he’d never seen such a beautiful sight before. It was something out of the realm of his lacking imagination.

The voice in my head was singing again, a soft, soothing melody that drowned out their cries. I tilted my head, listening, and smiled. I liked the song. It made me realize that everything was going to be just perfect.

“Don’t be sad,” I said to Papa, reassuring him although he’d never done that for me since Mama died. “She’s happy now. We’re all happy now.”

But they weren’t listening. Papa was clutching his chest, his breaths coming in shallow gasps. I’d always wondered if that day had weakened his heart and that was why he’d had a heart attack so early in his life. Cullen was backed against the wall, his face buried in his hands. He cried like a baby.

They didn’t understand. They couldn’t see what I had done for them, for all of us.

And that was fine. I didn’t need their reassurance. I knew I had done everything right.

Papa sat on the floor for what felt like forever, his head in his hands, trembling. I stayed in my chair, watching him like he was an actor in a play. His shoulders shook, and every so often, he would glance at Rowena, as if hoping the sight of her had somehow changed.

But it hadn’t. She was still perfect, still beautiful. The pearls around her neck gleamed softly in the lamplight, her painted lips curled into a faint smile. I so wanted to lift her up and put her back in

her chair, but I didn't think Papa would allow me.

Finally, he spoke, his voice broken and hoarse. "Cindy," he said, not looking at me. He never really ever looked at me again in the way a father looks at a beloved daughter. "I have to… I have to call the police."

I nodded, folding my hands in my lap. "It's okay, Papa. I understand. You do what you have to do."

He flinched, maybe at my calmness, his red-rimmed eyes darting toward me. For a moment, I thought he might say something else, but instead, he pulled himself to his feet. His movements were mechanical as he stumbled out of the room down the hall to the telephone.

I barely listened to his murmurs, his voice shaking as he tried to explain. Humming softly, I crouched on the floor next to Rowena, smoothed her hair, and adjusted the delicate lace on her dress sleeves. They had flipped upward and revealed her upper arms when she'd fallen over onto the floor. A lady never showed her arms off like that so I had to fix it.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

When the police arrived, I was still humming a cheerful little tune that the voice had given me. Two officers came into the room, their faces pale as they took in the scene. One of them, a tall man with a sharp jaw and a thick mustache, crouched down beside me. He asked me to tell him what had happened. His voice was low and steady, calming in a way.

I looked up at him and smiled. “It’s fine,” I said brightly. “Rowena’s happy now. Look at her. She’s never been happier.”

The officer blinked, his brow furrowing as he exchanged a glance with his partner. He seemed unsure of what to say next, so I helped him. I felt bad that he looked so upset and unsure. It was the least I could do for him after coming all this way.

“She was very sad before, I think,” I explained as if I were telling a bedtime story, “but I fixed her. Now, she’s pretty and quiet, and she doesn’t yell anymore.”

His hand hovered near my arm, like he wasn’t sure if he should touch me. He told me that he had to take me to the police station now.

I nodded, rising from my chair and smoothing the wrinkles in my dress. “That’s all right,” I said, reassuring him. He was just doing his job, and I didn’t want him to feel badly about that. “I’ll go with you. Rowena won’t mind. She’s very patient now.”

Papa was slumped against the wall in the hallway, his face pale and drawn. He didn’t look at me as they led me past him. I could hear him whispering under his breath, words I couldn’t quite make out, but I was certain he was telling me not worry and that I had done nothing wrong.

At the police station, everything felt so big and bright. The lights hurt my eyes, and the hum of voices made my head spin. They led me into a small room with a metal table and chairs, and a woman in a uniform sat across from me. She wasn’t like any woman I’d seen before. She was heavy and shaped like a man. She still had long hair, though, and it was pinned back from her squarish face. Despite her gruff appearance, I found her quite kind.

She asked me a lot of questions, but I don’t remember most of

them. I was too busy looking at the shiny badge on her chest, the way it caught the light.

When she asked me what had happened, I told her the story, my voice light and cheerful. Folding my hands neatly on the table, I told her about how mean Rowena had been to me, how negligent she'd been to Papa and Cullen. I told her that I made Rowena better, that I had truly made her happy.

The woman frowned and scribbled something in her notebook. She asked how I made things better, how I'd made Rowena happy.

I tilted my head, considering. "I played with her," I said. "We had tea parties, and I brushed her hair. She liked that. She liked that I treated her like a doll."

The woman leaned forward slightly, her eyes searching mine, and asked me if I had hurt Rowena.

The question took me aback. Smiling, I shook my head and explained, "Oh, no. I just made her prettier and perfect. She's much happier now."

They brought in a lawyer after that, a man in a suit who talked a lot but didn't say anything interesting. He asked me questions, too, but I didn't like him as much as the woman with the badge. His voice was too sharp and quick, like he was trying to catch me in a game I didn't know the rules to.

The psychologist who was next line was nicer. She had soft eyes and a gentle voice, and she asked me about my dolls, about the tea parties, about Rowena. I told her everything, painting the story like a picture in my mind.

"She didn't like me very much," I said, twisting a lock of my hair around my finger. Rowena had tried to stop me from the habit, but it just came automatically as I spun my tale. "She said I was bad and that Mama didn't raise me right, but now, she doesn't say that anymore. Now, she's nice to me."

The psychologist nodded, her pen scratching across the page, and asked me how I felt about what I'd done.

I thought about that for a moment. "I feel good," I said finally. I couldn't stop the smile that bloomed on my face. "I know I did the right thing and made everything better for me, for Papa and Cullen, and for Rowena."

She looked at me strangely after that, like she wanted to say something but couldn't find the words.

Through it all, I felt calm, like I was floating on a cloud. I kept humming softly in the back of my mind. It kept me safe.

The adults around me seemed so nervous, so unsure, but I didn't understand why. To me, it was simple. I had done what needed to be done. Rowena was happy now, and so was I. She'd wanted perfection,

and I'd given it to her. She'd never have to worry ever again about gaining weight, or not having the right dress on, or her hair being messy. She'd looked perfect in every way.

After they led me back to my cell that night, I curled up on the narrow bed, hugging the little doll they had let me keep. I hummed the lullaby that was stuck in my head, and I smiled to myself. Everything was going to be just fine. I'd never have to worry about not being perfect every again. Even though I didn't think it was possible, I did find my happy ending.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

CINDY TO JACK

I know you think I'm a bad person, but really, I'm not.

Before you do anything else tonight, will you do me a very small favor? Please? It's been a long time since I had a tea party. Will you join me for one?

It doesn't have to be anything fancy. Whatever you drink will be fine. I'm sure you've got some tea stashed away in the staff lunchroom. I don't even care about the biscuits either. I'd just like to hold a real proper teacup in my hands one last time, feel the china against my lips, and sip on the delicious steeped tea.

Please? You wouldn't say no to a dying woman's last request, would you?

JACK HERE: I sure as fuck said no. Hell no. I actually laughed while the medication did its job and she closed her eyes on last time.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

JACK

You may consider me horrible for not letting Cindy have her last dying wish.

Cindy doesn't seem so harmless lying in the bed, ties wrapped around her wrists, but let me tell you something about Cindy.

Every time she's had a tea party in this place, someone dies.

Every. Fucking. Time.

The last time she invited someone for tea was three years ago. Her guards had been lax. It had been a good five years since her last incident, and they figured nothing like that would happen again.

They were wrong.

There have been at least four deaths linked to her since she had been brought here. Poison. Shanks. Hits. Every person who joins her at her tea table ends up dead. One of those was a friend of mine.

So, no. She did not get a fucking tea party before she died.

ONLY JACK KNOWS

I'm doing something fun and it's all about the short audio - you know, the type you can listen to when you're running errands, on the road, doing chores.

They're not long pieces, but they do include confessions that won't make it into any of these confession books.

Consider them a "Behind the Scenes". Each 'episode' has a theme.

Best place to grab them is from my website or wherever you listen to audio books.

HAVE YOU READ THE HAUNTING SERIES YET?

THE HAUNTING OF GHOST LAKE

Chapter One
August 14, 1993

JAKE WILKINS

Jake wipes his clammy palms against his jeans as his foot eases just enough off the gas pedal. Maybe driving sixty down the dark, tree-lined dirt road isn't the smartest thing to do, regardless of David, his best friend, egging him on.

The last thing he wants to do is drive headfirst into one of these trees, thanks to a rut he can't see. His dad will kill him if he does, especially considering the old man helped buy this piece of junk.

“Slow down, asshole!” Mandy, David's girlfriend, barks out from the back. Jake glances at her through the mirror. She's got one hand touching the roof, the other giving him the finger.

Nice one. David sure knows how to pick the classy ones.

Despite being best friends, he doesn't get why David put up with her bullshit. She's always bitching and complaining about any and everything Jake does. It's like his best friend is immune to her cattiness. Either that, or he's just ignoring it.

Ten to one, they don't last. Jake gives them two weeks, tops. A month, at the most.

Is he going a bit fast, hitting the bumps too hard, and making Mandy and Crystal, who are in the back seat, hit their heads on the roof? Of course, he is - but that's what makes it so much fun.

Besides, from the ass-grinning smile on David's face, he's enjoying this.

So why does he put up with Mandy? It doesn't hurt that she's so hot, with a pretty face and banging body. If anything, it's the blowjobs. It's what she's known for.

Jake glances in the rearview mirror at Mandy and her friend,

Crystal. Mandy gives him a dirty look, then leans forward, setting her hand on David's shoulder, and whines, "Dave…"

David looks over at Jake with a *sorry man* type of look and suggests maybe slowing it down even more.

"Whatever." It doesn't matter anyway. Ghost Lake Sanatorium is just up ahead. The place has been neglected and abandoned for forty years or more. The sides of the building are black with age, and every window is broken, and most of them are boarded up. The front doors have slabs of wood nailed across them with huge DANGER, NO TRESPASSING signs on them.

Jake stops the car alongside the barbed wire fence that surrounds the building. The police are dumb if they think that's going to stop anyone from going inside and checking things out.

The stories about the sanatorium are too enticing not to see for yourself. He's been wanting to come forever, and yet…there's something about the place that has kept him away until now.

His leg bounces as he stares at the building up ahead. This place has a creep factor of *off-the-scale,* and from the way his heart beats against his chest, he's surprised everyone in the car can't hear how scared he feels.

One glance at David, and he's feeling it too. Jake wipes off all emotion from his face. The last thing he wants is for Mandy to notice.

She'd never let him live it down.

"Anyone see the monster?" Crystal leans forward, her hands gripping the front seats.

Last year, two middle schoolers snuck into the building and claimed they saw a shadow monster with glowing red eyes that chased them around. One of them had fallen through a hole in the front foyer and cut his leg as they ran out. His parents then went to the town council demanding more security be placed around the run-down building, ruining the experience for everyone else.

Coming here is a right of passage of sorts. What used to be a sanatorium for TB patients was then turned into a mental hospital for the criminally insane. What better place than out in the middle of nowhere, surrounded by mountains and a lake, in freaking northern Canada. Anyone who tried to escape died by natural causes - whether the wild animals or the cold, and those who didn't ended up on the chopping block of some insane doctor and nurse duo who sold their organs on the black market for profit.

It turns out money isn't the answer to everything because that duo was rumored to have been torn from limb to limb by a group of inmates in the late sixties.

"Well, are we doing this or what?" Mandy opens her door and gets out.

Jake can tell, despite her bravado, Mandy is scared shitless. So is Crystal, from the way she audibly swallows as she stares at the building, illuminated only by the bright full moon.

They all exit the car and gather in a group, a nervous energy pulsing between them.

Jake takes his shot, using this as the perfect situation to get close to Crystal. She's cute, not hot like Mandy, but there's more to her than just her smoking body. She's friendly, always ready with a smile for him, and with the cute little gap between her two front teeth, she's quite adorable. She's only ever given him the friends vibe, and that might be because he heard she hooked up with Mike Langdon, a senior, about a month or so ago, but until she turns him down, he'll keep believing there's a makeup session happening between them tonight.

“Are you sure we won’t get caught?” Crystal's voice shakes with uncertainty, which is funny since this was her suggestion.

“That’s what makes it more exciting.” Jake winks at her as he edges closer.

"Everyone ready?" Jake asks.

David reaches inside the car and and grabs a bag from the floor. In it is a bottle of vodka along with a jug of orange juice and some cups. "I am now."

"Now that's what I'm talking about," Mandy says as she places everything on the hood of Jake's car and mixes up the drinks. She passes everyone a cup, and they chug it back in a hurry, Jake especially, needing a little extra liquid courage if he's going to get close to Crystal.

"I thought you were bringing beer?" Jake says under his breath.

David shrugs. "This is all I could find. The vodka was at the back of the cupboard, so it won't get missed, and mom always buys extra orange juice for me."

Ever since they started hanging out in middle school, David has had an addiction to orange juice. On his own, he probably drinks a full jug every day. It's so bad that Jake's mom now keeps a jug of the juice in her fridge for when David comes over, which he does every day after school.

Once the buzz starts to set in, Jake takes out wire cutters from the car's trunk. "Always be prepared, as the old man says," he holds them up with a feeling of bravado.

Sniping a hole large enough for them all to climb through doesn't take much work. David goes first, then holds the fence for Mandy to crawl through after him.

Holding the fence open for Crystal, she's about halfway through before she backtracks.

"I almost forgot the whole reason why we're here," she says as she dashes back to the car. She returns, clutching a bag tight to her chest, and plants a little kiss on his cheek. "Thanks for waiting for me," she says.

"No problem," Jake mumbles as he watches her bend, giving him a perfect glance at her perfect ass.

Jake stays at the back of the pack as they walk toward the building, while David is up head, his steps way more eager than they should be.

David has been wanting to come here for ages, and it's always Jake who would find one excuse after another not to. So far, David hasn't caught on, at least, if he has, he hasn't said anything about it.

Seeing the place up close, Jake believes all the stories are true about this place. It has to be haunted; there's no other answer for the creepiness that lingers in the shadows as if those very tendrils are fingers just wanting to wrap themselves around the unsuspecting victims.

Victims like them.

If the girls weren't here, Jake would be hightailing it back to the car, David laughing at him be damned. This place gives off all the wrong vibes, and it's going to take a hell of a lot more alcohol to get him to walk through that door.

The closer they get, the more Jake wants to run. Fear finger walks its way up his spine, and he tries hard to suppress his shudder before anyone notices. Dread dances around him, its spikes catching on his jeans as he walks through the tall grass, and his stomach surges as he the imagery of skinless fingers poking up from the ground play with his head.

David races ahead and climbs up the rickety wood stairs, Mandy not too far behind him. She calls out to Jake and Crystal, telling them to hurry up. Crystal glances back toward Jake, her steps slowing as if waiting for him.

"You okay, slow poke?" Her eyes twinkle as she teases him.

All Jake can do is stare at her lips, remembering the touch of them on his cheek, and he swallows hard.

"Yeah, let's do this," he says with false bravado.

David grabs at the boards covering the door and, with the help of Mandy, pries a few away from the door.

"Jake man, come help," David says, grunting as he pulls harder.

It doesn't take much for the remaining boards to pop off. David tries the door handle, turning it one way, then the other, when they all hear a loud click, and the door nudges open as if on its own.

David jumps back with a 'huh' and then quickly laughs to cover up his surprise.

"Dude, the door was locked," David says to Jake.

"As if. Looks open to me."

"They must have forgotten to lock it when they boarded it up. Weird, huh?" Mandy says.

David nudges the door open wider just as an icy breeze blows over them, wrapping around their skin.

Both the girls yelp while David laughs. Jake joins in, but it's forced, and he prays to God that none of them notice.

The door slams shut just. They jump, and Crystal quickly grabs Jake's hand, squeezing hard.

David laughs again. "Maybe the place is haunted, and the spirits don't want us to come in," he teases as he nudges Mandy.

"Shut up, you asshole. That was probably just the wind closing the door, right?" Mandy glances back toward Crystal, then Jake.

He sees the challenge on Mandy's face, daring him to prove himself, unless he is too chicken, and if there's one thing he will not do, it's prove Mandy right.

David opens the door again, pushing it open hard enough that it hits the back of the wall, then slaps Jake on the back.

Is David scared too, but pretending to be brave for Mandy? If that's the case, Jake can do it too. Especially if it means Crystal doesn't let go of his hand.

“Come on, guys. You’re not scared, are you?” David smirks, then steps through the open door.

For one split second, Jake almost doesn't do it. A shudder runs over his skin the second he steps across the threshold, and Jake's reminded of a comic he'd just read, where a group of kids walk into the gaping maw of some grotesque creature, and through the black hole of its mouth they're swallowed and morphed into hell.

Jake pulls out the flashlight he'd stuffed in his back pocket and turns it on, sweeping it back and forth along the walls and floors as they creep through the place.

The place is disgusting, with garbage everywhere, broken tables and chairs, and shards of glass crunching beneath their shoes. In one room, there's a single mattress on the floor, and he made the mistake of letting the light stay in one place, illuminating the dark stains. He doesn't want to think about what those stains were made from or how they were made.

"There's something wrong with this place," Crystal mutters to him. She released his hand a while ago, but she has yet to stray more than two feet away from him, which, to be honest, Jake is more than okay with.

Jake feels it, too. The air carries a thick layer of dread that coats his sweaty skin.

"Is anyone else here?" His voice squeaks as he asks the question.

"Seriously, dude?" David laughs as he turns and gives him one of those *what the fuck is wrong with you* looks.

"I feel it too," Crystal says, touching Jake's arm. "Like someone is watching us."

"Someone or something…" Mandy contorts her voice to sound like a witch, and Jake gives her the middle finger.

They can laugh all they want, but the thick layer of goosebumps over his skin tells a different story.

Someone or something is here with them. Watching him.

Not just him but all of them.

A steady scratch-like nails on a chalkboard combined with the sound of a dozen rats scurrying about, Jake turns in circles, trying to determine where the sound is coming from. If it's rats, they're definitely in the walls, and yet, the sounds are both above his head and right beneath his feet.

Crystal gasps and jumps. "Something just touched my ankle."

David laughs, but he doesn't sound as sure as before. "Come on, don't be stupid. You're just letting the place get to you. Those sounds are just rats. The cold draft is from an opening somewhere. That's it. The rest are just stories someone made up to keep kids away."

Jake copies his laugh. "Yeah, probably."

"Come on. I hear there are tunnels beneath us. Now that would be the perfect place for our thing tonight. After all, this was your idea, Crystal, right?"

Crystal hugs the bag she'd brought close to her chest and steps away from Jake.

"Let's do this."

MORE CONFESSION BOOKS?

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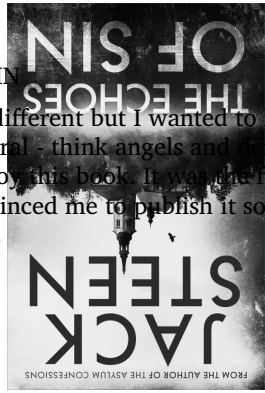
THE ECHOES OF SIN - A JACK ORIGINAL

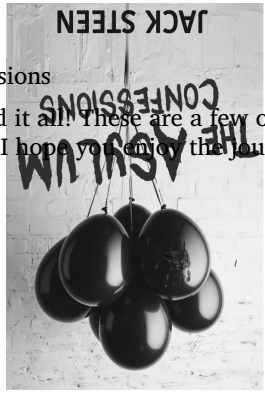


THE ECHOES OF SIN

This one is a little different but I wanted to let you know about this book. If you like anything supernatural - think angels and demons, nephalim and a spiritual war - then you might enjoy this book. It was the first one I've ever written and my VIP Addicts group convinced me to publish it so everyone could read it.

I hope you enjoy it!

CONFESSION BOOK - THE ORIGINALS



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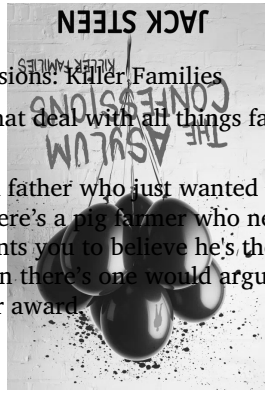
The one that started it all! These are a few of my favorite confessions - if you haven't already read them, I hope you enjoy the journey!

CONFESSION BOOK - KILLER FAMILIES

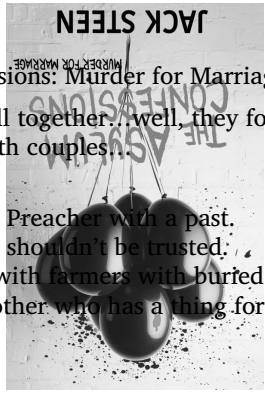


The Asylum Confessions: Killer Families

More confessions that deal with all things family related.

- One is a father who just wanted to protect his little girl.
- Then there's a pig farmer who never should have had children.
- One wants you to believe he's the brother of a mob boss.
- And then there's one would argue she should receive the Mother of the Year award.

CONFESSION BOOK - MURDER FOR MARRIAGE

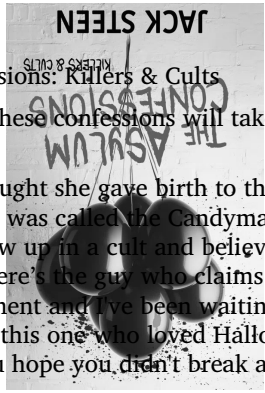


The Asylum Confessions: Murder for Marriage

The couples that kill together…well, they for sure don't stay together, right? These confessions deal with couples…

- One is a Preacher with a past.
- Another shouldn't be trusted.
- What's with farmers with buried secrets?
- And another who has a thing for soil and gardens.

CONFESSION BOOK - KILLERS & CULTS

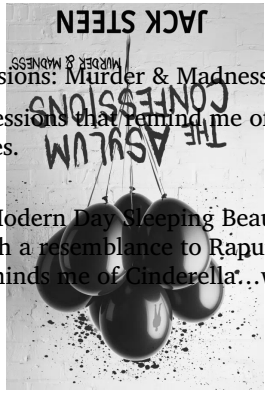


The Asylum Confessions: Killers & Cults

Trust me on this…these confessions will take you on a wild ride:

- One thought she gave birth to the antichrist.
- Another was called the Candyman...any guess why?
- One grew up in a cult and believes he was the first of a 'pure' race.
- Then there's the guy who claims he was part of a secret test by the government and I've been waiting on his confession for a while!
- Finally, this one who loved Halloween and believed in all the rules. I sure you hope you didn't break any...

CONFESSION BOOK - MURDER & MADNESS

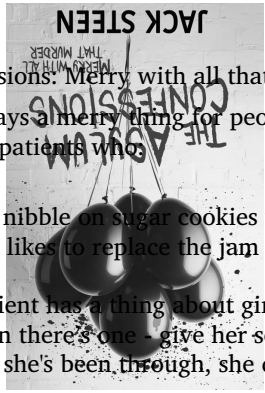


The Asylum Confessions: Murder & Madness

This book has confessions that remind me of the original Grimm brothers tales - you know, the good ones.

- Think Modern Day Sleeping Beauty – with a twist.
- One with a resemblance to Rapunzel that is kind of scary.
- One reminds me of Cinderella…with a thing for shoes.

CONFESSION BOOK - MERRY WITH ALL THAT MURDER



The Asylum Confessions: Merry with all that Murder

Christmas isn’t always a merry thing for people. These confessions focus on the holiday theme and patients who:

- Likes to nibble on sugar cookies while watching his victim die
- Another likes to replace the jam in the thumbprint cookies with blood
- One patient has a thing about gingerbread cookies and revenge
- And then there’s one - give her some candy cane shortbread cookies - after all she's been through, she deserves them.